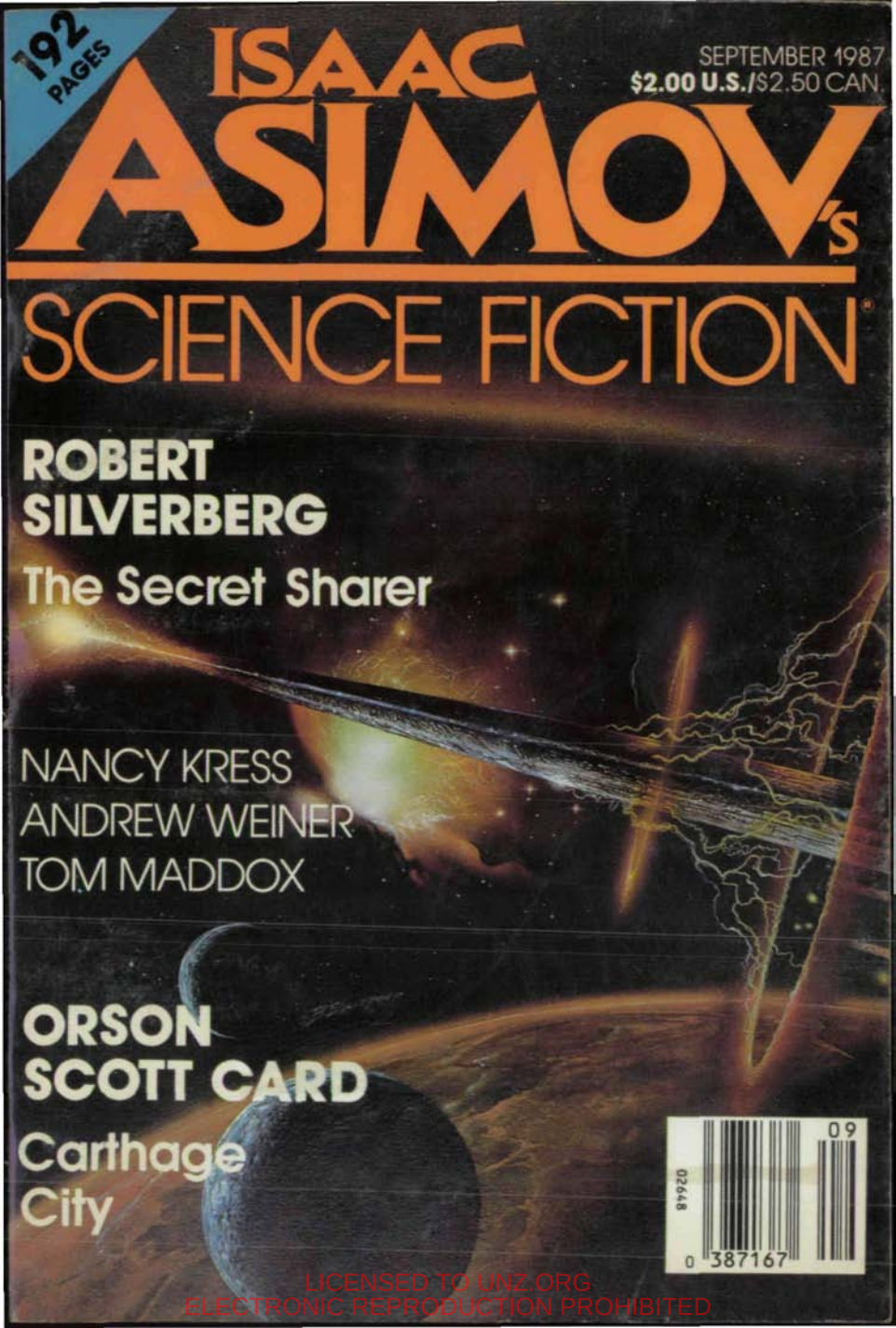

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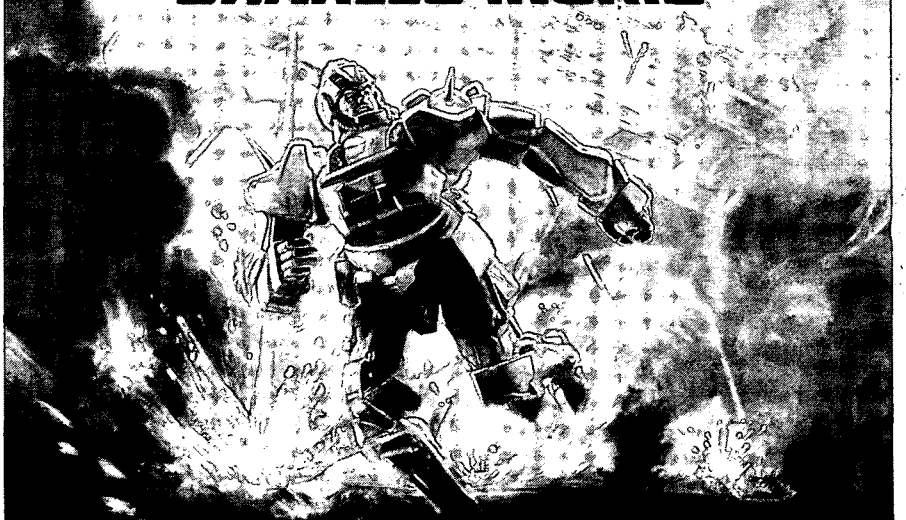

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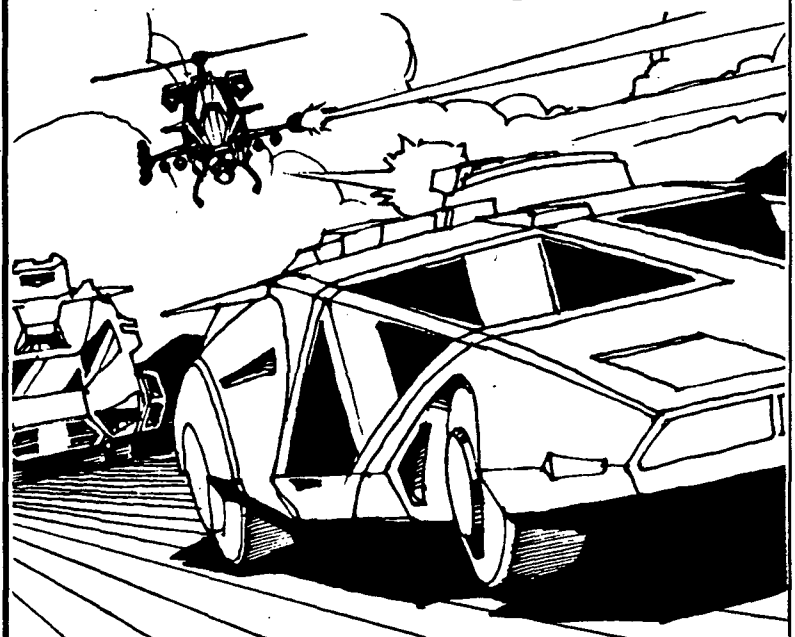

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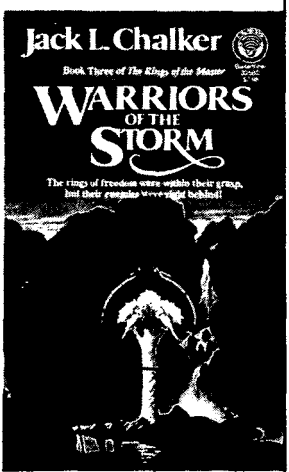

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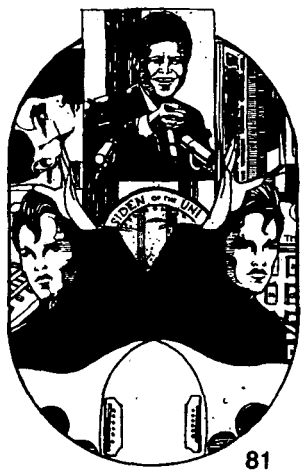

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

PLAUSIBILITY

We received a very interesting letter from David F. Godwin of Dallas, Texas. He discusses and contrasts "hard science fiction" (which he abbreviates as "hsf") and "fantasy." For the purpose, he uses Norman Spinrad's definitions, which he quotes as follows:

Science fiction is "any work of fiction containing a speculative element belonging to the sphere of the 'could be, but isn't.' " Fantasy, on the other hand, is "any work of fiction containing an element which openly and knowingly contradicts what we presently consider the 'possible.' "

Godwin than takes an extremely hard-line approach to this business of "the sphere of the 'could be, but isn't.' " Any story that contains faster-than-light travel, for instance, contains an impossibility (at least as we see it now) and is therefore not really science fiction, and certainly not hsf. In Godwin's words "a story that uses it is somehow not really 'science fiction' any longer, but, because of that element, science-flavored fantasy."

He goes on to say, "To my mind, once you've admitted the wedge of an impossibility . . . it doesn't do any good to keep 'everything else' on a scientific technological basis. You might as well haul in the dragons, hobbits, and orcs. The technological and/or scientific explanations begin to fall flat. 'If this guy is pulling my leg about the speed of light, how can I trust anything he says?' "

I sympathize with Godwin's point of view. I pointed out the essential impossibility of faster-than-light travel in my editorial "Faster Than Light" *(Asimov's,* November 1984), and the impossibility of time-travel in my editorial "Time Travel" *(Asimov's,* April 1984). What's more, I'm forced to agree that science fiction that makes use of impossibilities is not quite ultimately hard.

And yet, as I said in my editorials, impossibilities such as these shouldn't be eliminated from science fiction. They wipe out too many plots, make it necessary to ignore too many interesting societies, arrange to eliminate too many points of view, and destroy too much of the fun and purpose of both writing and reading.

I can't fault Godwin's logic once you accept the definitions he gives of science fiction and fantasy, so

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I'm forced to fault the definitions. Why not? After all—ask one hundred SF aficionados to define SF and you'll get one hundred definitions. Everyone knows that. In that case, let's see what we can make of it.

In the first place, shall we agree that all serious fiction has to be self-consistent? I can think of exceptions, of course. Fiction that purports to describe a dream (*Alice in Wonderland* being the most famous of these) do not have to be self-consistent, because dreams are not. Wild burlesques do not have to be self-consistent, because their purpose is precisely that of inducing laughter through inconsistency.

However, leaving these exceptional cases to one side, we must have self-consistency because we want any story, however fantastic it may be, to *seem* true, at least while we read it. (That's called "suspension of disbelief.") Since we live in a self-consistent universe, we have become very accustomed to that and we demand self-consistency in our fictional universes. A character cannot be clever at one time and stupid at another. A book cannot be in English one day and in Latin another day.

But wait, you *can* have such self-consistencies, *if you explain them.* Dorothy Sayers once had a character who seemed clever enough at times and downright retarded at others. She explained it by having the character's thyroid hormone concentration vary. She didn't get

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it quite right, but if she hadn't advanced something, the story would simply have been meaningless and unreadable. A book can be in English one day and Latin the next if there are two such books, identical in appearance, which are, for some reason, switched without the knowledge of the person who is trying to read it.

Maybe, then, what distinguishes a science fiction story from a fantasy, and both from a realistic story, is the manner in which inconsistencies are explained.

In a realistic story, an inconsistency is explained by some device which exists, or can exist right now. *You* can do it, if you are strong enough, or clever enough. As I said, there is the case of the two books and a substitution.

In a fantasy, on the other hand, an inconsistency can be explained away in a manner that has nothing to do with reality; that is, by preference, completely unreal. You change a book from English to Latin by waving your hand and muttering mystic words, or by burning a chicken feather and waving the smoke to the four corners of the room, or by anything else.

Naturally, fantasy doesn't leave you completely free. Perhaps the enchanter relies on a wand and it is in the wand that the power lies. If his wand is stolen, he is helpless. Or the power is in the precise words he uses, and if he forgets them, he is helpless. He can't use any piece of wood as a wand and he can't use any combination of words as a spell.

So you see, then, that in realistic stories, all explanations must fit the laws of nature as we know them. In fantasies, all explanations are likely to exist *outside* the laws of nature and the limits they set.

But then, either we make use of the laws of nature or we don't. Either a story is realistic or it is a fantasy. Where then does science fiction fit in?

To me, it would seem that science fiction respects the laws of nature, which is what makes it different from fantasy. It also allows itself to extend or distort the laws of nature to some degree and that makes it different from realistic stories.

Thus, in a thoroughly realistic story, you can have a human being stand on the Moon, because men have already done so and the storyteller can, if he takes the trouble, learn all the necessary technology involved.

In a hard science fiction story, a human being can travel to the nearer stars by using an ion drive once he is out in space, or matter-antimatter interaction, or a laser beam and a solar sail. None of these devices currently exist, but they are all reasonably possible and none violate any laws of nature.

In a soft science fiction story, a human being can reach any star by a leap through hyperspace or by some similar device that defies the laws of nature as we know them.

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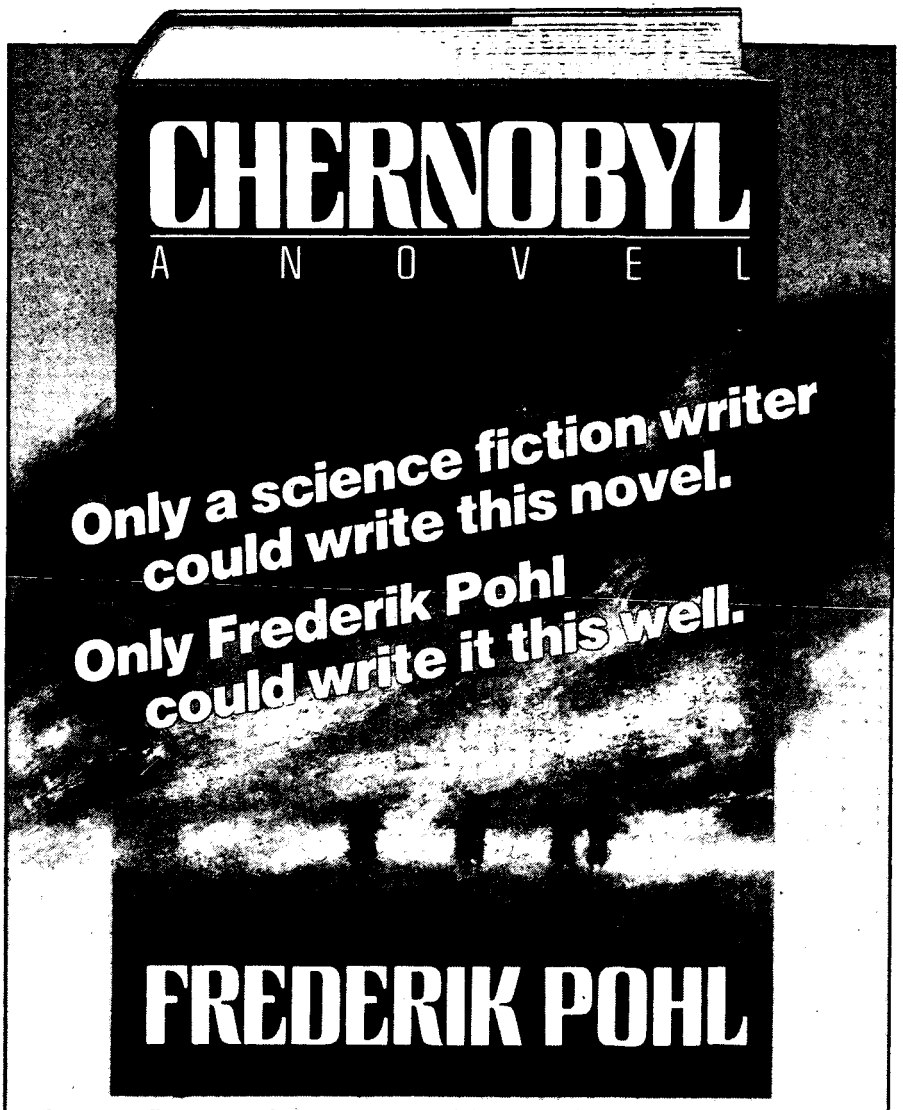
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—Isaac Asimov

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The author, however, if he's competent, understands that, and manages to put together an explanation that *seems* in accordance with what natural law *might* be. The key there is not accuracy, but *plausibility*, the kind that derives from an adequate knowledge of science on the part of the writer. It is scientific plausibility, not scientific accuracy, that we seek in science fiction.

In soft fantasy, the writer concentrates on building a universe in which the laws of nature are radically different from what they are here. (Sprague de Camp is very good at that.) In such a universe, you can magic yourself to a very distant planet but do so in sober fashion.

In hard fantasy, you might close your eyes and think happy thoughts and be wherever you want to be in the blink of an eye.

Or consider time travel.

In realistic stories, it never happens. It can never happen. It will never happen.

In hard science fiction, you might go so far as to view the past, perhaps, without possibly being able to participate.

In soft science fiction, you can participate in the past, but with due regard for paradoxes and for any changes you may make in the portion of history later than your intrusion.

In soft fantasy, you can travel through time, either past or future by some sort of magic instrument or spell, but there are limits. The device you use might only be able to take you to some period in which it itself exists. (I'm thinking of Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet.)*

In hard fantasy, you travel through time freely and without limit and without effect on anything.

You can build up similar divisions in the case of almost any fictional theme. Naturally, the boundaries are fuzzy and you can't always tell easily in which slot a particular story might be.

In fact, you can take a deliberately broad attitude to such divisions, and decide to consider eligible for inclusion in a magazine like this one any sort of SF story, hard or soft, letting the hard edge lap pretty far into the realistic, and letting the soft edge lap pretty far into the soft fantasy. You might say that as long as a story is interesting and effective and made to sound plausible, it is suitable, and we need not bother overmuch about boundaries.

And that, I think is what Gardner and Sheila, and Shawna before them, have done. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I would like to ask your readers to send any material on mining the asteroids they might have readily available, especially regarding of what the asteroids consist, how the metal would be broken off the asteroids, crushed, smelted, refined, and extruded in space, and what metals would most likely be mined. There are no science fiction circles in Israel, and it is extremely difficult to acquire speculative material of this nature. No I don't think even Israel will be secretly mining the asteroids in a spectacular Mossad operation in the next couple of years.

Dennis Turner
Hashaish St. 5/14
Gilo, Jerusalem
Israel

I can't say that I myself have any technical information on the matter, but I'm sure that, given the quality of our readership, there are some out there who do. If they are in the mood to write directly to Mr. Turner on the subject, they are welcome to do so.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Contrary to Peter Bernier's opinion in the October issue, "Green Mars" was not a syllable too long. I wonder how many other readers missed the point that the internal journey was far more important than the physical one? Did members of the "idea" faction start squirming nearer to the story's beginning than the "characterization" backers? Anyway, I consider "Green Mars," together with "Twenty-Four Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai" and "Gilgamesh in the Outback," to be worth the price of my entire subscription to date (about six years' worth). Thank you.

Thank you also, many times, for printing another of Avram Davidson's "Adventures in Unhistory." I've known for years that there was a profound relationship between folklore and science fiction, but I'm not sure I could define it even now. Suffice it to say that if you print more, I'll read them, and if Mr. Davidson puts them all together in a book, I'll buy it, especially if it has a bibliography.

Now that you have a new editor, I'm sure you'll be making some changes; perhaps you'll try printing interviews with some established SF authors again. I never understood why your readers, so many of whom are supposedly aspiring authors themselves, weren't interested in what the pros had to

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say about their craft and their careers.

I am. Please consider it.

Thanks again. Maybe I'll write you another letter in another six years or so.

Yrs,

L. G. Ramsdell
Lanham, MD

Gardner has indeed made some changes. Under him, for instance, we have run serials. I'm sure that if he has the chance to run an interesting interview with an interesting writer, he will—but we must leave it to him to decide when and with whom.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov;

I really must protest the increasing absence of Baird Searles from your otherwise irreproachable magazine.

Each month, upon receiving my eagerly anticipated copy of *Asimov's*, I leaf to the back of the magazine, searching for my favorite column, "On Books," by Baird Searles. As a matter of fact, the last section of *Asimov's* is often the one I read first.

Baird's insight is wonderful, and his wit just acidic enough to please this reader's wry sense of humor. His critiques have more than once led me to search for a recommended book which I would otherwise have missed.

So, with all due respect to Mr. Spinrad, I must yet plead—print more Baird Searles!!!

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Clark
N.Charleston, SC

I agree with you whole-heartedly. I am a great admirer of Baird's reviews.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I wanted to write to tell you what an excellent magazine *Asimov's* is, with great stories by the newest and best writers, as well as by old and familiar ones; the combination is hard to beat. I've also very much enjoyed the articles which have been running in the "books" section, and the Viewpoint, "A Reader's Guide to the Postmoderns," which ran a few months ago, was responsible for my attending my first SF convention ever, the Armadillocon in Austin, Texas last October.

I wanted in particular to comment on the Norman Spinrad article in the mid-December issue, "Science Fiction Versus Sci-Fi." While the article was very well written, I had and have some serious disagreements with it, and so I've decided to tell them to you.

Mr. Spinrad has some things to say about SF as genre fiction that I have heard before, but they never fail to disturb me, and this article was no exception. Basically, it seems to me that he is saying what non-readers of SF have been saying since the genre was born, that it's all about ray guns and rockets, and that the genre is intrinsically void of value. His sole example to the contrary is his own novel, *Child of Fortune*. I will readily agree with Mr. Spinrad that many of the novels of writers such as E.E. "Doc" Smith and Edgar Rice Burroughs and Edmond Hamilton are not good examples of "elitist" fiction, i.e.,

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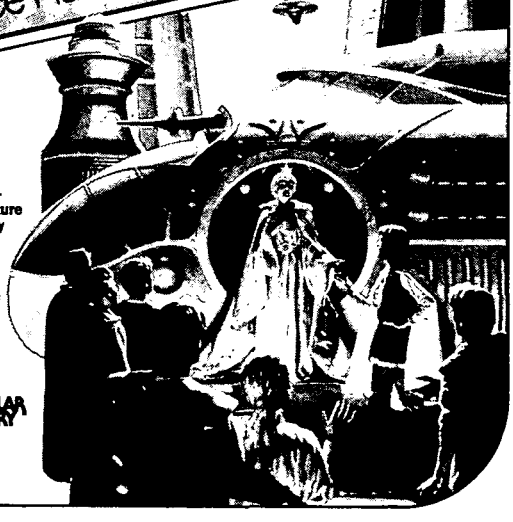

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the sort of thing produced by a John Updike or a Norman Mailer or an Ursula K. LeGuin. While I enjoyed books such as *The Skylark of Space* and *The Master Mind of Mars* the many times I've read them, I wouldn't toss them in the same ring with *Rabbit Run* or *The Naked and the Dead.* The problem is, Mr. Spinrad ignores, or appears to ignore, any of a large number of writers who have, for the past thirty or forty years, navigated the seas of genre SF with tremendous skill, utilizing the "sci-fi plot skeleton" to their own considerable advantage. (I fail to see anything wrong with the fact that American SF "did not evolve as a subset of the general sphere of 'serious' or 'elitist' American literature, but as a subset of commercial popular literature.") He criticizes Orson Scott Card and Walter Jon Williams thoroughly, but he fails somehow to mention the following—Theodore Sturgeon, Gene Wolfe, Cordwainer Smith, A.E. Van Vogt, Fritz Leiber, Philip K. Dick, Edgar Pangborn, Clifford Simak, or any of a number of others who have done brilliant, brilliant things with "genre" SF; and I honestly *do not* believe that any of the writers listed above would have benefited one iota by assuming the methods of, say, Norman Mailer or Kurt Vonnegut or Raymond Carver or Thomas Wolfe. Sturgeon's Law says that most SF is not good; while this is a truism and not an excuse, Mr. Spinrad, by saying that SF "[lacks] a decent sense of tragedy," negates a vast proportion of what Theodore Sturgeon wrote, as well as large portions of the above-mentioned Philip K. Dick, Cordwainer Smith, and Fritz Leiber. Also, Mr. Spinrad's reference to the "sexually arrested adolescent who becomes the savior of the human race . . . " who is " . . . as close as identification of the audience with the hero can get" was, to me anyway, somewhat insulting; for that matter, I doubt that a majority of the people who voted for *Ender's Game* would fit that bill, either. And how, pray tell, are we to *argue* with Mr. Spinrad's assertion about the reading audience of books like *Ender's Game*? I mean, if we are all sexually repressed adolescents, then are our arguments worth noting?

In essence, I feel it unnecessary for SF writers and readers to cater to the critical criteria of what is essentially just another genre of fiction, and a smaller and darker one at that. If he wishes to write for them, more power to him; I don't have to read it. I agree with what the late mainstream writer and critic John Gardner referred to as "life-affirming" fiction; what's the value in reading fiction which goes about telling you how horrid life is, and how nobody is really worth a damn anyway? I myself fail to see the point in that; I prefer to believe, as I think I've heard the Good Doctor express it, that people *are* essentially good; and I believe that you'll find a great deal more of that thought in SF as a whole, than in the "elitist" genre.

That's what I have to say about that. I'm glad that there's a magazine which can serve as a place for people to argue their thoughts one way and another. Thanks for an excellent magazine.

Donald Lee
Fayetteville, AR

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Actually, I feel that Norman is correct by narrow literary standards, but literary standards are always narrow. Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain and many other writers were in their time considered "crude," "mawkish," "unpolished," and many other such adjectives and compared, most unfavorably, with leading literary lights of their day whose names neither I, nor anyone else, any longer remembers.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

The movie, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, is actually a SF/fantasy movie, yet it is not billed as such. Although I am a member of Mensa (like yourself), a former beauty queen (in 1964), and a happy housewife (thanks to Peter, my wonderful husband), I, too, like Peggy Sue—who was no longer geared to being a teenage, high school student living under her parents' roof, experience a certain existential sense of alienation from everyday events and a sort of search for meaningfulness. And I think it is this sense of alienation which leads me to subcribe to *IAsfm* and certain other literature in the first place. The arrival of *IAsfm* in my mail adds meaningfulness to life. Keep up the good work—you are doing a terrific job!

Sincerely,

Joan Danylak
Forest Hills, N. Y.

Many a woman would consider that she had amply found meaningfulness in life if she were a beauty queen, past or present. But I can well believe that even in such cases, IAsfm *adds to the fun.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doc,

Received the Mid-December issue of *IAsfm* yesterday and have just finished devouring it. My compliments to Gardner Dozois for carrying on the "Beauteous Shawna's" procurement of quality SF.

Although I have been an aficionado of SF for many years, I came relatively late to the Asimov style, being somehow put off by your larger-than-life ego and flip (seemingly) personality. Milton exhorted us to promiscuous reading back in the 1600s, and I finally took his call to heart, added the good doctor to my list, and never looked back (nor regretted it).

Unfortunately, into every fiction some rain must fall, and the name of my most unfavorable rain in fiction is blatant error. I can suspend judgment with the best of them, but when blatant error is encountered, my brakes are automatically applied and the story-line instantly marred. Pat Murphy's piquant "In the Abode of the Snows" captured my identification with the hero from the outset since I, also, had hunted the Yeti, but when he cut meat with a pocketknife on page 69 when I was told that the pocketknife was pilfered on page 62 my brakepads smoked!

I realize that the blue pencil can't do it all, but suspect that the author himself must bear the culpability for the blatant errors which dodge the blue pencil and survive into print. Perhaps as a budding author (unpublished, as yet) I am

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overcritical, yet hope and pray that although I may perpetrate errors in my prose, none of them will be of the blatant type.

Thank you for having one of, if not the best SF magazines on the market. May you someday have the good taste to print one of my short stories.

Sincerely,

Bill Appel
Hilmar, CA

Since you quote Milton, I'll take the chance of referring to Cervantes. In Don Quixote *a villain steals Dapple, the beloved ass of Sancho Panza. Yet a few chapters further on, there is Sancho, riding his ass blissfully, and long before he actually recovers it. All the commentators point it out and in the second part (written ten years after the first), Cervantes refers to the misstep in comical fashion. Or to quote Horace: "Quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus"—i.e. "Sometimes even good old Homer nods."*

—Isaac Asimov

TO: Isaac Asimov
Gardner Dozois
Sheila Williams
Joel Davis

Since we are all busy I will omit the interesting ancillary details.

Major Issue: I subscribed to *IAsfm* for the "Viewpoint" section. You haven't published one for the last five issues (through the "Mid-Dec." number). You've thus lost my renewal and interest, and I do regret that very much.

Minor Issue: Since time is very much at a premium, I limit my SF reading to books, and I look to book reviews for guidance. Your book review section is simply too brief—and I wonder about your interest in that part of the publication. E.g., Norman Spinrad's "Science Fiction Versus Sci-Fi" ought to have been a "Viewpoint" feature instead of an inadequate substitute for a "book review" section in the "Mid-Dec." issue. That I learned about the "restart" of the Ace Science Fiction Specials (second series) in a bookstore instead of in *IAsfm* is indicative and disappointing.

Thank you for your consideration—and for some great issues in the past.

John Lulves
RR 1, #92
Elverson, PA 19520

There you are! We get letters objecting to the fact that we don't have science fiction cover-to-cover, and here we lose a subscription because of our inadequacy as a periodical devoted to science fiction news and opinion.

—Isaac Asimov

In Reference To: "On Books: Science Fiction vs. Sci-Fi," by Norman Spinrad; mid-December 1986.

Dear Mr. Spinrad,

Let me see if I understand your thesis:

1. Only Hacks write Happy Endings.

2. It ain't really Literature unless the hero dies.

Thanks, I think I've got it!

Future Hack Writer,

William K. Whitenack
2409 Madrid Court
Davis, CA 95616

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Somehow I feel this may be an oversimplification of Norman's views.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

In the mid-December issue, there seem to be at least a couple of mistakes that should have been caught in the editing. First, in "Neptune's Reach," we are told that a bathyscaphe was lowered on a line from a satellite in synchronous orbit. It is not possible to lower anything without thrust on the bathyscaphe or a rigid column to force it towards the planet, since the bathyscaphe is also in a satellite orbit and thus cannot just be lowered. In the second place, if it is forced down towards the surface of the planet, as its radius decreases its period must decrease in accordance with Kepler's third law, so the vehicle would not be directly under the synchronous satellite unless it expended large amounts of energy to maintain its position.

In Harlan Ellison's "Laugh Track," he comments that "It was probably the way Catherine the Great felt on her dates with Rasputin." How could they have dated, as she died in 1796 and he was not born until around 1871?

In any case, thanks for an excellent magazine.

Sincerely,

Marley E. Bechtel
Kenmore, NY

As for Harlan's coupling of Catherine the Great and Rasputin, Sheila consulted me and I said, "Yes, that is an anachronism." She then consulted Harlan, and he said, "The sentence is there simply for the effect it creates and is not meant to be literally true."

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

It would seem to me, Dr. Asimov, that the proper phraseology would have to be, "Elvex, until I say your name again, you will not move or speak or hear."

Jo Clark
Gilford, NH

You are probably right, since I write purely by instinct and not by any procedure involving rational thought. However, when you say, "until I say your name again you will not move or speak or hear," the robot first hears that his name will be spoken again and the rest is a modification. When I say, as I did, "You will not move nor speak nor hear us until I say your name again," the robot hears that he must not move or speak or hear first, *and the rest is modification. I think the more important element should be spoken first as I did. But who knows? That's just instinct.*

—Isaac Asimov

ANNOUNCEMENT: SFOHA Names Williamson Library As Regional Repository

The Science Fiction Oral History Association (SFOHA) has recently named the Jack Williamson Science Fiction Library as a regional repository for its oral history archives. During the past decade, SFOHA has been actively involved in recording hundreds of inter-

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views with science fiction writers, editors, fans, and scholars, as well as in taping convention sessions and other programs. Cassette copies of the SFOHA tapes have been placed in the Williamson Library at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, available to interested persons according to fair use copyright guidelines.

Besides the SFOHA oral history archives, the Williamson Library offers other resources such as 9,000 published novels and anthologies, backed up by some 10,000 single issues of pulp magazines, slicks, and fanzines, many extending back into the "golden age" of science fiction and earlier. It has extensive private papers of several pioneer writers in the genre, plus twenty years of copy-edited manuscript files from *Analog* and some years of administrative files from the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA). SFWA has also designated the Williamson Library as a regional repository for review copies of hardback publications.

The Williamson Library is open 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday. Additional hours and interlibrary loans may be arranged in advance. Jack Williamson, who is himself one of the "golden age" pioneers and who is still actively writing, keeps office hours in the library by appointment. For more information, contact Mary Jo Walker, Special Collections Librarian, Eastern New Mexico University, Portales, NM 88130 (phone 505-562-2636).

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

In 1948 the invention of the transistor, by American physicists Walter H. Brattain and William Shockley, was announced to the world.

But somehow, in those heady days of witch hunts, the overnight creation of suburbia, and Uncle Miltie in drag, the lowly transistor, with its intriguing silicon semiconductors, went almost unnoticed.

Except by the Japanese.

Now, I grew up in a era when "Made in Japan" was a symbol for junk. But when the first transistor radios invaded the U.S. mainland, and quickly conquered the beaches and picnic benches of Eisenhower's America, it wasn't long before Japanese electronic goods gained a begrudging reputation for a certain, undeniable high quality.

About a year and a half ago I wrote my first column for *IAsfm's* reviewing the Japanese Nintendo Entertainment System, nothing less than an all-out, no holds barred attempt to bring back the video game—the vice that most people thought had had its day.

But the Nintendo Entertainment System was different. Besides souped-up games, with arcade-quality graphics, the N.E.S. also offered R.O.B., a goggle-eyed robot who could take commands from the TV screen itself.

R.O.B. proved to be fun, even though N.E.S. hasn't done much with him outside of a game or two. But the N.E.S. went on to become a phenomenal success.

Shortly after this, SEGA, long a leader in arcade games, announced the arrival of the SEGA Master Systems ($159, MEGA Cartridges $35, SEGA Cards, $30)—another Japanese video game system ready to go head-to-head with Nintendo.

And they also have done very well.

Like the N.E.S., the SEGA System comes with a light-sensitive gun, their Light Fazer, which is used for shooting games. The control pads are almost identical to Nintendo's—a pad for 360 degree movement, and two fire buttons. There is also a mini, three-quarter-inch joy stick which can be screwed into the control pad, but it is almost useless.

The console for the game is a bit more glitzy than Nintendo's solemn grey box. There's a schematic that lights up when you turn the power on. It tells you what peripherals you are using (i.e., the light gun or controllers). There's a cartridge slot that accepts SEGA's

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"MEGA cartridge"—a cassette sized package, and another slot that accepts a "SEGA Card"—a credit-card sized game that fits into the console much like a bank's "instant teller" card.

The system comes with cables, wires, and adapters for every possible hook-up. There's a ten-pin video cable for direct link to a monitor (which provides a very sharp picture) as well as transformers, automatic RF switch box, and 75/300 Ohm Converter.

The SEGA games are, of course, the thing that they hope will sell the system and they are significantly different from Nintendo's games. First, there seems to be a greater emphasis on action and violence. Their *Rambo Game* is exciting, but carries a heavy body count. And *Ninja* and *Black Belt* are not, as you might imagine, word games.

But the system also has some charming, whimsical games that are delightful. *Alex Kidd in Miracle World* is perhaps the best video game since Nintendo's *Super Mario Bros. Fantasy Zone*, dealing with an amoeba-like spaceship fighting its way through eight dazzlingly colored worlds, each filled with a different assortment of bizarre animals, is exciting and different.

The system comes with two games that are more than throw-aways. *Safari* is, like Nintendo's *Duck Hunt*, a shooting game. Players graduate from blasting woodland ducks (who turn into roasts when hit) to taking potshots at a woods crawling with bears and armadillos. The final screen presents jungle animals who dart across it with increasing speed.

The system also comes with *Hang On*, an exciting motorcycle race with outstanding graphics.

The SEGA System, despite trailing Nintendo, has been a great success. And there are two reasons for this. Both SEGA and the N.E.S. games have a consistent feel to them. The games have a standard of design and difficulty that remains relatively constant. With the laser guns, and N.E.S.'s robot, they offer a new way of playing with video games.

Even Atari is, phoenix-like, trying to reclaim its position. It has a new super game system available, and there are new cartridges planned for the lowly Atari 2600—the original video game system.

And there are more surprises on the way.

SEGA is also releasing a three dimensional video game, a game played with special goggles. One game demonstrated at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas last January was a dramatic space battle game that had startling depth—you actually seemed to be navigating through the vastness of space.

So, if all you've experienced is *Pong* and *Pack-Man*, take note: the video game is back.

With a vengeance. ●

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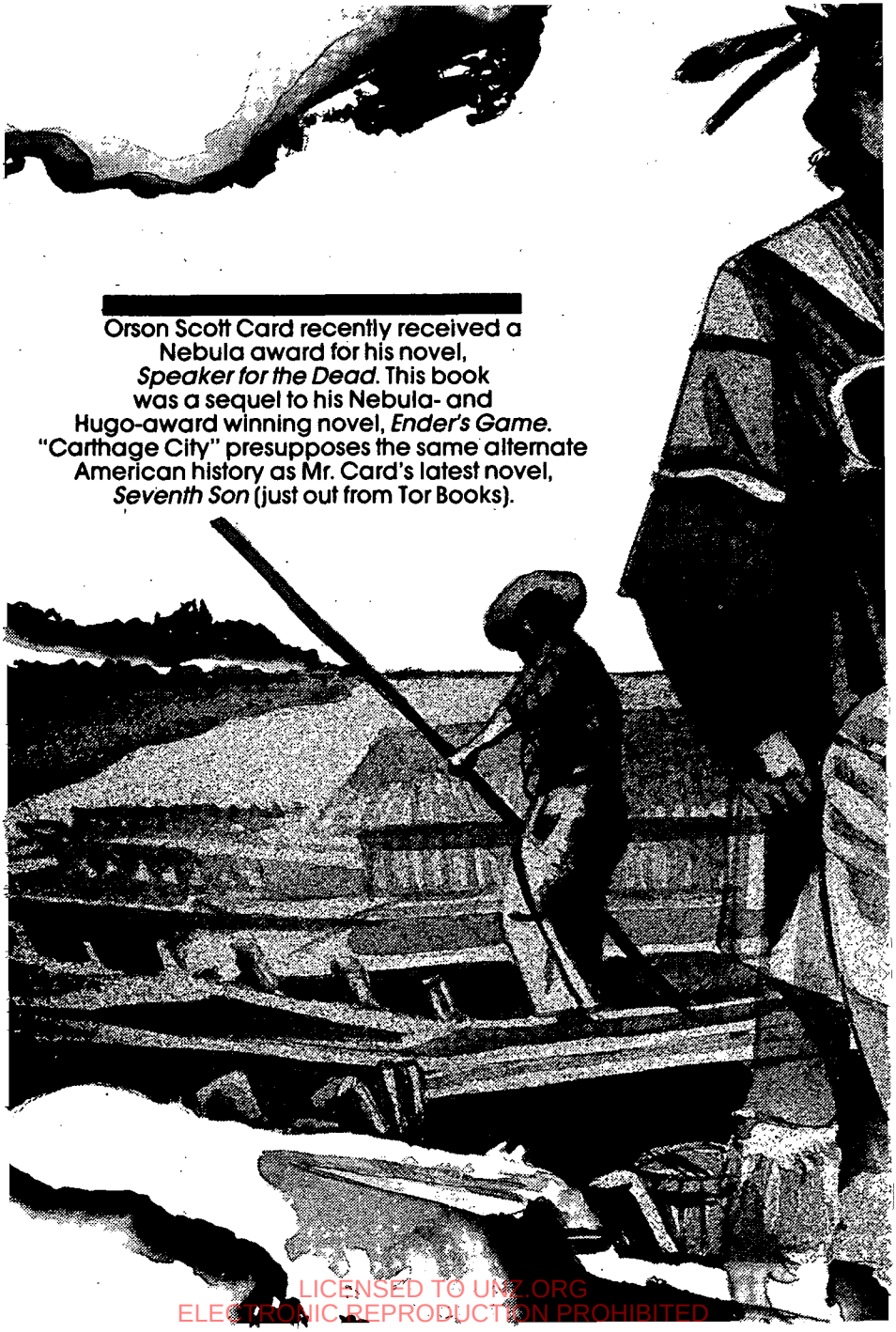

Orson Scott Card recently received a Nebula award for his novel, *Speaker for the Dead*. This book was a sequel to his Nebula- and Hugo-award winning novel, *Ender's Game*. "Carthage City" presupposes the same alternate American history as Mr. Card's latest novel, *Seventh Son* (just out from Tor Books).

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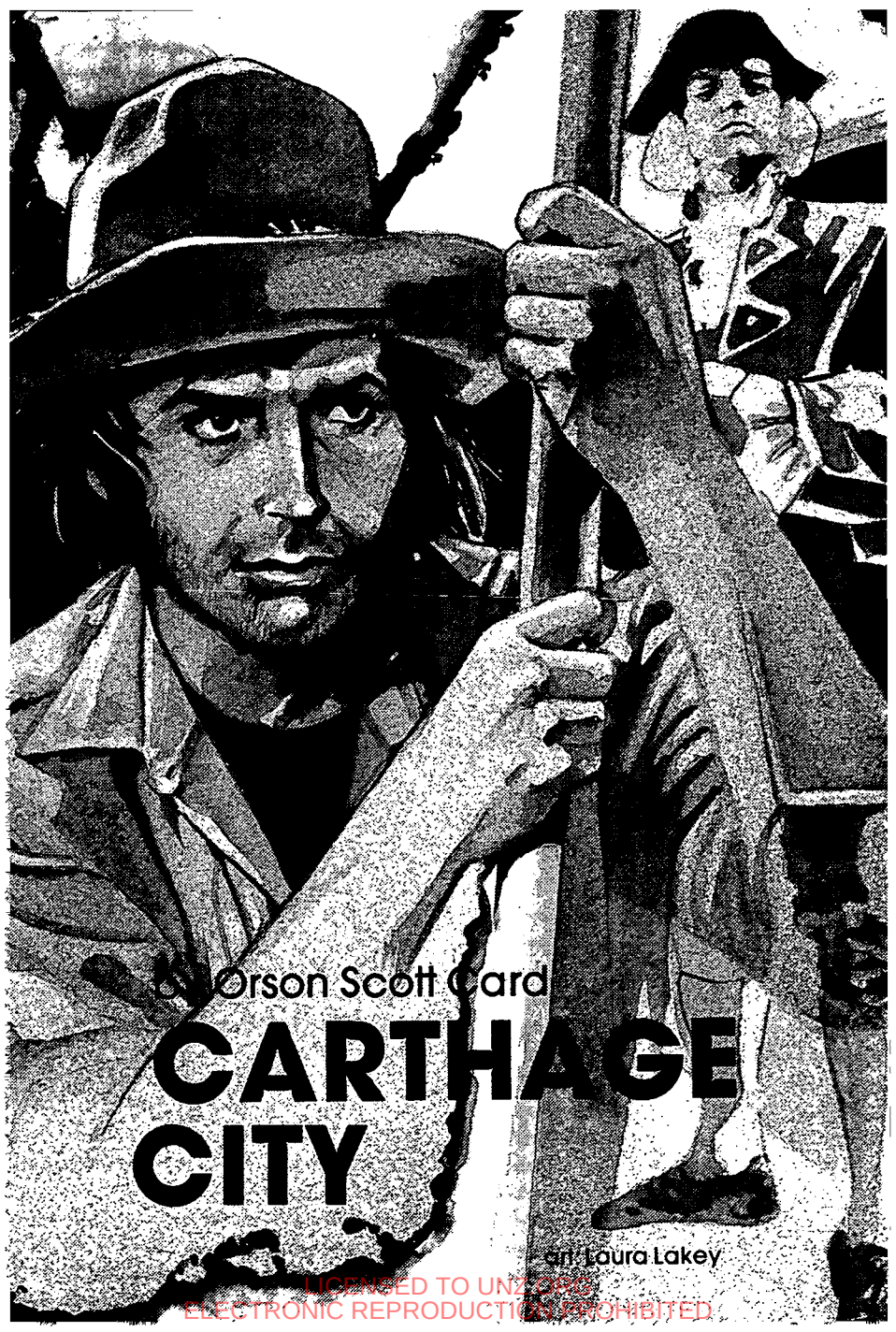

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Not many flatboats were getting down the Hio these days, not with pioneers aboard, anyway, not with families and tools and furniture and seed and a few shoats to start a pig herd. These were troublous times. It took only a couple of fire arrows and pretty soon some tribe of Reds would have themselves a string of half-charred scalps to sell to the French in Detroit.

But Hooch Palmer had no such trouble. The Reds all knew the look of *his* flatboat, stacked high with kegs. Most of those kegs sloshed with whisky, which was about the only musical sound them Reds understood. But in the middle of the vast heap of cooperage there was one keg that didn't slosh. It was filled with gunpowder, and it had a fuse attached.

How did he use that gunpowder? They'd be floating along with the current, poling on round a bend, and all of a sudden there'd be a half-dozen canoes filled with painted-up Reds of the Kicky-Poo persuasion. Or they'd see a fire burning near shore, and some Shaw-Nee devils dancing around with arrows ready to set alight. For most folks that meant it was time to pray, fight, and die. Not Hooch, though. He'd stand right up in the middle of that flatboat, a torch in one hand and the fuse in the other, and shout, "Blow up whisky! Blow up whisky!"

Well, most Reds didn't talk much English, but they sure knew what "blow up" and "whisky" meant. And instead of arrows flying or canoes overtaking them, pretty soon them canoes passed by him on the far side of the river. Some Red yelled, "Carthage City!" and Hooch hollered back, "That's right!" and the canoes just zipped on down the Hio, heading for where that likker would soon be sold.

The poleboys, of course, it was their first trip downriver, and they didn't know all that Hooch Palmer knew, so they about filled their trousers first time they saw them Reds with fire arrows. And when they saw Hooch holding his torch by that fuse, they like to jumped right in the river. Hooch just laughed and laughed. "You boys don't know about Reds and likker," he said. "They won't do nothing that might cause a single drop from these kegs to spill into the Hio. They'd kill their own mother and not think twice, if she stood between them and a keg, but they won't touch *us* as long as I got the gunpowder ready to blow if they lay one hand on me."

Privately the poleboys might wonder if Hooch really would blow the whole raft, crew and all, but the fact is Hooch *would*. He wasn't much of a thinker, nor did he spend much time brooding about death and the hereafter or such philosophical questions, but this much he had decided: when he died, he supposed he wouldn't die alone. He also supposed that if somebody killed him, they'd get no profit from the deed, none at all. Specially not some half-drunk weak-sister cowardly Red with a scalping knife.

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The best secret of all was, Hooch wouldn't need no torch and he wouldn't need no fuse, neither. Why, that fuse didn't even go right into the gunpowder keg, if the truth be known—Hooch didn't want a chance of that powder going off by accident. No, if Hooch ever needed to blow up his flatboat, he could just set down and think about it for a while. And pretty soon that powder would start to hotten up right smart, and maybe a little smoke would come off it, and then pow! it goes off.

That's right. Old Hooch was a spark. Oh, there's some folks says there's no such thing as a spark, and for proof they say, "Have you ever *met* a spark, or knowed anybody who did?" But that's no proof at all. Cause if you happen to be a spark, you don't go around telling everybody, do you? It's not as if anybody's hoping to hire your services—it's too easy to use flint and steel, or even them alchemical matches. No, the only value there is to being a spark is if you want to start a fire from a distance, and the only time you want to do that is if it's a *bad* fire, meant to hurt somebody, burn down a building, blow something up. And if you hire out *that* kind of service, you don't exactly put up a sign that says Spark For Hire.

Worst of it is that if word once gets around that you're a spark, every little fire gets blamed on you. Somebody's boy lights up a pipe out in the barn, and the barn burns down—does that boy ever say, "Yep, Pa, it was me all right." No sir, that boy says, "Must've been some spark set that fire, Pa!" And then they go looking for *you*, the neighborhood scapegoat. No, Hooch was no fool. He didn't ever tell nobody about how he could get things het up and flaming.

There was another reason Hooch didn't use his sparking ability too much. It was a reason so secret that Hooch didn't rightly know it himself. Thing was, fire scared him. Scared him deep. The way some folks is scared of water, and so they go to sea; and some folks is scared of death, and so they take up gravedigging; and some folks is scared of God, and so they set to preaching. Well Hooch feared the fire like he feared no other thing, and so he was always drawn to it, with that sick feeling in his stomach; but when it was time for him to lay a fire himself, why, he'd back off, he'd delay, he'd think of reasons why he shouldn't do it at all. Hooch had a knack, but he was powerful reluctant to make much use of it.

But he would have done it. He would have blown up that powder and himself and his poleboys and all his likker, before he'd let a Red take it by murder. Hooch might have his bad fear of fire, but he'd overcome it right quick if he got mad enough.

Good thing, then, that the Reds loved likker so much they didn't want to risk spilling a drop. No canoe came too close, no arrow whizzed in to thud and twang against a keg, and Hooch and his kegs and casks and

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firkins and barrels all slipped along the top of the water peaceful as you please, clear to Carthage City, which was Governor Harrison's high-falutin name for a stockade with a hundred soldiers right smack where the Little My-Ammy River met the Hio. But Bill Harrison was the kind of man who gave the name first, then worked hard to make the place live up to the name. And sure enough, there was about fifty chimney fires outside the stockade this time, which meant Carthage City was almost up to being a village.

He could hear them yelling before he hove into view of the wharf—there must be Reds who spent half their life just setting on the riverbank waiting for the likker boat to come in. And Hooch knew they were specially eager this time, seeing as how some money changed hands back in Fort Dekane, so the other likker dealers got held up this way and that until old Carthage City must be dry as the inside of a bull's tit. Now here comes Hooch with his flatboat loaded up heavier than they ever saw, and he'd get a price this time, that's for sure.

Bill Harrison might be vain as a partridge, taking on airs and calling himself governor when nobody elected him and nobody appointed him but his own self, but he knew his business. He had those boys of his in smart-looking uniforms, lined up at the wharf just as neat as you please, their muskets loaded and ready to shoot down the first Red who so much as took a step toward the shore. It was no formality, neither—them Reds looked mighty eager, Hooch could see. Not jumping up and down like children, of course, but just standing there, just standing and watching, right out in the open, not caring who saw them, half naked the way they mostly were in summertime. Standing there all *humble*, all ready to bow and scrape, to beg and plead, to say, Please Mr. Hooch one keg for thirty deerskins, oh that would sound sweet, oh indeed it would; Please Mr. Hooch one tin cup of likker for these ten muskrat hides. "Whee-haw!" cried Hooch. The poleboys looked at him like he was crazy, cause they didn't know, they never saw how these Reds used to look, back before Governor Harrison set up shop here, the way they never deigned to look at a White man, the way you had to crawl into their wicky-ups and choke half to death on smoke and steam and sit there making signs and talking their jub-jub until you got permission to trade. Used to be the Reds would be standing there with bows and spears, and you'd be scared to death they'd decide your scalp was worth more than your trade goods.

Not any more. Now they didn't have a single weapon among them. Now their tongues just hung out waiting for likker. And they'd drink and drink and drink and drink and drink and *whee-haw*! They'd drop down dead before they'd ever stop drinking, which was the best thing of all, best thing of all. Only good Red's a dead Red, Hooch always said, and the way he and Bill Harrison had things going now, they had them

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Reds dying of likker at a good clip, and paying for the privilege along the way.

So Hooch was about as happy a man as you ever saw when they tied up at the Carthage City wharf. The sergeant even saluted him, if you could believe it! A far cry from the way the U.S. Marshalls treated him back in Suskwahenny, acting like he was scum they just scraped off the privy seat. Out here in this new country, free-spirited men like Hooch were treated most like gentlemen, and that suited Hooch just fine. Let them pioneers with their tough ugly wives and wiry little brats go hack down trees and cut up the dirt and raise corn and hogs just to live. Not Hooch. He'd come in after, after the fields were all nice and neat looking and the houses were all in fine rows on squared-off streets, and then he'd take his money and buy him the biggest house in town, and the banker would step off the sidewalk into the mud to make way for him, and the mayor would call him sir—if he didn't decide to be mayor himself by then.

This was the message of the sergeant's salute, telling his future for him, when he stepped ashore.

"We'll unload here, Mr. Hooch," said the sergeant.

"I've got a bill of lading," said Hooch, "so let's have no privateering by your boys. Though I'd allow as how there's probably one keg of good rye whisky that somehow didn't exactly get counted on here. I'd bet that one keg wouldn't be missed."

"We'll be as careful as you please, sir," said the sergeant, but he had a grin so wide it showed his hind teeth, and Hooch knew he'd find a way to keep a good half that extra keg for himself. If he was stupid, he'd sell his half-keg bit by bit to the Reds. You don't get rich off a half keg of whisky. No, if that sergeant was smart, he'd *share* that half-keg, shot by shot, with the officers that seemed most likely to give him advancement, and if he kept that up, someday that sergeant wouldn't be out greeting flatboats, no sir, he'd be sitting in officers' quarters with a pretty wife in his bedroom and a good steel sword at his hip.

Not that Hooch would ever tell this to the sergeant. The way Hooch figured, if a man had to be told, he didn't have brains enough to do the job anyway. And if he had the brains to bring it off, he didn't need no flatboat likker dealer telling him what to do.

"Governor Harrison wants to see you," said the sergeant.

"And I want to see *him*," said Hooch. "But I need a bath and a shave and clean clothes first."

"Governor says for you to stay in the old mansion."

"*Old* one?" said Hooch. Harrison had built the official mansion only four years before. Hooch could think of only one reason why Bill might

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have upped and built another so soon. "Well, now, has Governor Bill gone and got hisself a new wife?"

"He has," said the sergeant. "Pretty as you please, and only fifteen years old, if you like that! She's from Manhattan, though, so she don't talk much English or anyway it don't *sound* like English when she does."

That was all right with Hooch. He talked Dutch real good, almost as good as he talked English and a lot better than he talked Shaw-Nee. He'd make friends with Bill Harrison's wife in no time. He even toyed with the idea of—but no, no, it wasn't no good to mess with another man's woman. Hooch had the desire often enough, but he knew things got way too complicated once you set foot on that road. Besides, he didn't really need no white woman, not with all these thirsty squaws around.

Would Bill Harrison bring his children out here, now he had a second wife? Hooch wasn't too sure how old them boys would be now, but old enough they might relish the frontier life. Still, Hooch had a vague feeling that the boys'd be a lot better off staying in Philadelphia with their aunt. Not because they shouldn't be out in wild country, but because they shouldn't be near their father. Hooch liked Bill Harrison just fine, but he wouldn't pick him as the ideal guardian for children—even for Bill's own.

Hooch stopped at the gate of the stockade. Now, there was a nice touch. Right along with the standard hexes and tokens that were supposed to ward off enemies and fire and other such things, Governor Bill had put up a sign, the width of the gate. In big letters it said

CARTHAGE CITY

and in small letters it said

CAPITAL OF THE STATE OF WOBBISH

which was just the sort of thing old Bill would think of. In a way, he expected that sign was more powerful than any of the hexes. As a spark, for instance, Hooch knew that the hex against fire wouldn't stop him, it'd just make it *harder* to start a fire up right near the hex. If he got a good blaze going somewhere else, that hex would burn up just like anything else. But that sign, naming Wobbish a state and Carthage its capital, why, that might actually have some power in it, power over the way folks thought. If you say a thing often enough, people come to expect it to be true, and pretty soon it *becomes* true. Oh, not something like "The moon is going to stop in its tracks and go backward tonight," cause for that to work the moon'd have to hear your words. But if you say things like "That girl's easy" or "That man's a thief," it doesn't much matter whether the person you're talking about believes you or not—everybody *else* comes to believe it, and treats them like it was true. So Hooch figured that if Harrison got enough people to see a sign that

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named Carthage as the capital of the state of Wobbish, someday it'd plumb come to be.

Fact is, though, Hooch didn't much care whether it was Harrison who got to be governor and put his capital in Carthage City, or whether it was that teetotaling self-righteous prig Armor-of-God Weaver up north, where Tippy-Canoe Creek flowed into the Wobbish River, who got to be governor and make Vigor Church the capital. Let those two fight it out; whoever won, Hooch intended to be a rich man and do as he liked. Either that or see the whole place go up in flames. If Hooch ever got completely beat down and broken, he'd make sure nobody else profited. When a spark had no hope left, he could still get even, which is about all the good Hooch figured he got out of being a spark.

Well, of course, as a spark he made sure his bathwater was always hot, so it wasn't a total loss. Sure was a nice change, getting off the river and back into civilized life. The clothes laid out for him were clean, and it felt good to get that prickly beard off his face. Not to mention the fact that the squaw who bathed him was real eager to get an extra dose of likker, and if Harrison hadn't sent a soldier knocking on his door telling him to hurry it up, Hooch might have collected the first installment of her trade goods. Instead, though, he dried and dressed.

She looked real concerned when he started for the door. "You be back?" she asked.

"Look here, of course I will," he said. "And I'll have a keg with me."

"Before dark though," she said.

"Well maybe yes and maybe no," he answered. "Who cares?"

"After dark, all Reds like me, outside fort."

"Is that so," murmured Hooch. "Well, I'll try to be back before dark. And if I don't, I'll remember you. May forget your face, but I won't forget your hands, hey? That was a real nice bath."

She smiled, but it was a grotesque imitation of a real smile. Hooch just couldn't figure out why the Reds didn't die out years ago, their women were so ugly. But if you kind of closed your eyes, a squaw would do well enough until you could get back to real women.

It wasn't just a new mansion Harrison had built—he had added a whole new section of stockade, so the fort was about twice the size it used to be. And a good solid parapet ran the whole length of the stockade. Harrison was ready for war. That made Hooch pretty uneasy. The likker trade didn't thrive too good in wartime. The kind of Reds who fought battles weren't the kind of Reds who drank likker. Hooch saw so much of the latter kind that he pretty much forgot the former kind existed. There was even a cannon. No, two cannons. This didn't look good at all.

Harrison's office wasn't in the mansion, though. It was in another building entirely, a new headquarters building, and Harrison's office was

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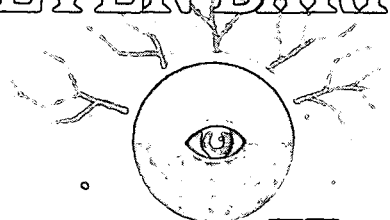

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in the southwest corner, with lots of light. Hooch noticed that besides the normal complement of soldiers on guard and officers doing paperwork, there were several Reds sprawling or sitting in the headquarters building. Harrison's tame Reds, of course—he always kept a few around.

But there were more tame Reds than usual, and the only one Hooch recognized was Lolla-Wossiky, a one-eyed Shaw-Nee who was always about the drunkest Red who wasn't dead yet. Even the other Reds made fun of him, he was so bad, a real lickspittle.

What made it even funnier was the fact that Harrison himself was the man who shot Lolla-Wossiky's father, some fifteen years ago, when Lolla-Wossiky was just a little tyke, standing right there watching. Harrison even told the story sometimes right in front of Lolla-Wossiky, and the one-eyed drunk just nodded and laughed and grinned and acted like he had no brains at all, no human dignity, just about the lowest, crawliest Red that Hooch ever seen. He didn't even care about revenge for his dead papa, just so long as he got his likker. No, Hooch wasn't a bit surprised to see that Lolla-Wossiky was lying right on the floor outside Harrison's office, so every time the door opened, it bumped him right in the butt. Incredibly, even now, when there hadn't been new likker in Carthage City in four months, Lolla-Wossiky was pickled. He saw Hooch come in, sat up on one elbow, waved an arm in greeting, and then rocked back onto the floor without a sound. The handkerchief he kept tied over his missing eye was out of place, so the empty socket with the sucked-in eyelids was plainly visible. Hooch felt like that empty eye was looking at him. He didn't like that feeling. He didn't like Lolla-Wossiky. Harrison was the kind of man who liked having such squalid creatures around—made him feel real good about himself, by contrast, Hooch figured—but Hooch didn't like seeing such miserable specimens of humanity. Why hadn't Lolla-Wossiky died yet?

Just as he was about to open Harrison's door, Hooch looked up from the drunken one-eyed Red into the eyes of another man, and here's the funny thing: He thought for a second it was Lolla-Wossiky again, they looked so much alike. Only it was Lolla-Wossiky with both eyes, and not drunk at all, no sir. This Red must be six feet from sole to scalp, leaning against the wall, his head shaved except his scalplock, his clothing clean. He stood *straight*, like a soldier at attention, and he didn't so much as look at Hooch. His eyes stared straight into space. Yet Hooch knew that this boy saw *everything*, even though he focused on nothing. It had been a long time since Hooch saw a Red who looked like that, all cold and in control of things.

Dangerous, dangerous, is Harrison getting careless, to let a Red into his own headquarters with eyes like those? With a bearing like a king, and arms so strong he looks like he could pull a bow made from the

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trunk of a six-year-old oak? Lolla-Wossiky was so contemptible it made Hooch sick. But this Red who looked like Lolla-Wossiky, he was the opposite. And instead of making Hooch sick, he made Hooch mad, to be so proud and defiant as if he thought he was as good a man as any White. No, better. That's how he looked—like he thought he was *better*.

Then he realized he was just standing there, his hand on the latch pull, staring at the Red. Hadn't moved in how long? That was no good, to let folks see how this Red made him uncomfortable. He pulled the door open and stepped inside.

But he didn't talk about that Red, no sir, that wouldn't do at all. It wouldn't do to let Harrison know how much that one proud Shaw-Nee bothered him, made him angry. Because there sat Governor Bill behind a big old table, like God on his throne, and Hooch realized things had changed around here. It wasn't just the fort that had got bigger—so had Bill Harrison's vanity. And if Hooch was going to make the profit he expected to on this trip, he'd have to make sure Governor Bill came down a peg or two, so they could deal as equals instead of dealing as a tradesman and a governor.

"Noticed your cannon," said Hooch, not bothering even to say howdy. "What's the artillery *for*, French from Detroit, Spanish from Florida, or Reds?"

"No matter who's buying the scalps, it's always Reds, one way or another," said Harrison. "Now sit down, relax, Hooch. When my door is closed there's no ceremony between us." Oh, yes, Governor Bill liked to play his games, just like a politician. Make a man feel like you're doing him a favor just to let him sit in your presence, flatter him by making him feel like a real *chum* before you pick his pocket. Well, thought Hooch, I have some games of my own to play, and we'll see who comes out on top.

Hooch sat down and put his feet up on Governor Bill's desk. He took out a pinch of tobacco and tucked it into his cheek. He could see Bill flinch a little. It was a sure sign that his wife had broke him of some manly habits. "Care for a pinch?" asked Hooch.

It took a minute before Harrison allowed as how he wouldn't mind a bit of it. "I mostly swore off this stuff," he said ruefully.

So Harrison still missed his bachelor ways. Well, that was good news to Hooch. Gave him a handle to get the Gov off balance. "Hear you got yourself a white bed-warmer from Manhattan," said Hooch.

It worked: Harrison's face flushed. "I married a *lady* from New Amsterdam," he said. His voice was quiet and cold. Didn't bother Hooch a bit—that's just what he wanted.

"A *wife*!" said Hooch. "Well, I'll be! I beg your pardon, Governor, that

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wasn't what I heard, you'll have to forgive me, I was only going by what the—what the rumors said."

"Rumors?" asked Harrison.

"Oh, no, you just never mind. You know how soldiers talk. I'm ashamed I listened to them in the first place. Why, you've kept the memory of your first wife sacred all these years, and if I was any kind of friend of yours, I would've known any woman you took into your house would be a lady, and a properly married wife."

"What I want to know," said Harrison, "is who told you she was anything *else*?"

"Now, Bill, it was just loose soldiers' talk, I don't want any man to get in trouble because he can't keep his tongue. A likker shipment just came in, for heaven's sake, Bill! You won't hold it against them, what they said with their minds on whisky. No, you just take a pinch of this tobacky and remember that your boys all like you fine."

Harrison took a good-sized chaw from the offered tobacco pouch and tucked it into his cheek. "Oh, I know, Hooch, they don't bother me." But Hooch knew that it *did* bother him, that Harrison was so angry he couldn't spit straight, which he proved by missing the spittoon. A spittoon, Hooch noticed, which had been sparkling clean. Didn't *anybody* spit around here any more, except Hooch?

"You're getting civilized," said Hooch. "Next thing you know you'll have lace curtains."

"Oh, I do," said Harrison. "In my house."

"And little china chamber pots?"

"Hooch, you got a mind like a snake and a mouth like a hog."

"That's why you love me, Bill—cause you got a mind like a hog and a mouth like a snake."

"Keep that in mind," said Harrison. "You just keep that in mind, how I might bite, and bite deep, and bite with poison in it. You keep that in mind before you try to play your diddly games with me."

"Diddly games!" cried Hooch. "What do you mean, Bill Harrison! What do you accuse me of!"

"I accuse you of arranging for us to have no likker at all for four long months of springtime, till I had to hang three Reds for breaking into military stores, and even my soldiers ran out!"

"Me! I brought this load here as fast as I could!"

Harrison just smiled.

Hooch kept his look of pained outrage—it was one of his best expressions, and besides it was even partly true. If even one of the other whisky traders had half a head on him, he'd have found a way downriver despite Hooch's efforts. It wasn't *Hooch's* fault if he just happened to be the

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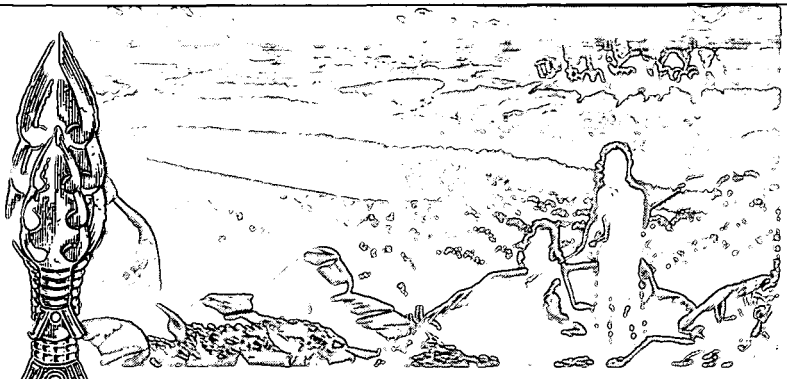

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sneakiest, most malicious, lowdown, competent skunk in a business that wasn't none too clean and none too bright to start with.

Hooch's look of injured innocence lasted longer than Harrison's smile, which was about what Hooch figured would happen.

"Look here, Hooch," said Harrison.

"Maybe you better start calling me Mr. Ulysses Palmer," said Hooch. "Only my *friends* call me Hooch."

But Harrison did not take the bait. He did not start to make protests of his undying friendship. "Look here, *Mr.* Palmer," said Harrison, "you know and I know that this hasn't got a thing to do with friendship. You want to be rich, and I want to be governor of a real state. I need your likker to be governor, and you need my protection to be rich. But this time you pushed too far. You understand me? You can have a monopoly for all I care, but if I don't get a steady supply of whisky from you, I'll get it from someone else."

"Now, Governor Harrison, I can understand you might've started fretting along in there sometime, and I can make it right with you. What if you had six kegs of the best whisky all on your own—"

But Harrison wasn't in the mood to be bribed, either. "What you forget, Mr. Palmer, is that I can have *all* this whisky, if I want it."

Well, if Harrison could be blunt, so could Hooch, though he made it a practice to say things like this with a smile. "Mr. Governor, you can take all my whisky *once*. But then what trader will want to deal with you?"

Harrison laughed and laughed. "Any trader at all, Hooch Palmer, and you know it!"

Hooch knew when he'd been beat. He joined right in with the laughing.

Somebody knocked on the door. "Come in," said Harrison. At the same time he waved Hooch to stay in his chair. A soldier stepped in, saluted, and said, "Mr. Andrew Jackson here to see you, sir. From the Tennizy country, he says."

"Days before I looked for him," said Harrison. "But I'm delighted, couldn't be more pleased, show him in, show him in."

Andrew Jackson. Had to be that lawyer fellow they called Mr. Hickory. Back in the days when Hooch was working the Tennizy country, Hickory Jackson was a real country boy—killed a man in a duel, put his fists into a few faces now and then, had a name for keeping his word, and the story was that he wasn't exactly completely married to his wife, who might well have another husband in her past who wasn't even dead. That was the difference between Hickory and Hooch—Hooch would've made sure the husband was dead and buried long since. So Hooch was a little surprised that this Jackson was big enough now to have business that would take him clear from Tennizy up to Carthage City.

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But that was nothing to his surprise when Jackson stepped through the door, ramrod straight with eyes like fire. He strode across the room and offered his hand to Governor Harrison. Called him *Mr.* Harrison, though. Which meant he was either a fool, or he didn't figure he needed Harrison as much as Harrison needed *him.*

"You got too many Reds around here," said Jackson. "That one-eyed drunk by the door is enough to make a body puke."

"Well," said Harrison, "I think of him as kind of a pet. My own pet Red."

"Lolla-Wossiky," said Hooch helpfully. Well, not really helpfully. He just didn't like how Jackson hadn't noticed him, and Harrison hadn't bothered to introduce him.

Jackson turned to look at him. "What did you say?"

"Lolla-Wossiky," said Hooch.

"The one-eyed Red's name," said Harrison.

Jackson eyed Hooch coldly. "The only time I need to know the name of a horse," he said, "is when I plan to ride it."

"My name's Hooch Palmer," said Hooch. He offered his hand.

Jackson didn't take it. "Your name is Ulysses Brock," said Jackson, "and you owe more than ten pounds in unpaid debts back in Nashville. Now that Appalachee has adopted U.S. currency, that means you owe 220 dollars in gold. I bought those debts and it happens that I have the papers with me, since I heard you were trading whisky up in these parts, and so I think I'll place you under arrest."

It never occurred to Hooch that Jackson would have that kind of memory, or be such a skunk as to buy a man's paper, especially seven years old paper, which by now should be pretty much forgot. But sure enough, Jackson took a warrant out of his coat pocket and laid it on Governor Harrison's desk.

"Since I appreciate your already having this man in custody when I arrived," said Jackson, "I am glad to tell you that under Appalachee law the apprehending officer is entitled to ten percent of the funds collected."

Harrison leaned back in his chair and grinned at Hooch. "Well, Hooch, maybe you better set down and let's all get better acquainted. Or I guess maybe we don't have to, since Mr. Jackson here seems to know you better than I did."

"Oh, I know Ulysses Brock all right," said Jackson. "He's just the sort of skunk we had to get rid of in Tennizy before we could lay claim to being civilized. And I expect you'll be rid of his sort soon enough here, too, as you get the Wobbish country ready to apply for admission to the United States."

"You take a lot for granted," said Harrison. "We might try to go it alone out here, you know."

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"If Appalachee couldn't make a go of it alone, with Tom Jefferson as president, you won't do any better here, I reckon."

"Well maybe," said Harrison, "just maybe we've got to do something that Tom Jefferson didn't have the guts to do. And maybe we've got a need for men like Hooch here."

"What you have need for is soldiers," said Jackson. "Not rummers."

Harrison shook his head. "You're a man who forces me to come to the point, Mr. Jackson, and I can calculate right enough why the folks in Tennizy sent you on up here to meet with me. So I'll come to the point. We've got the same trouble up here that you've got down there, and that trouble can be summed up in one word: Reds."

"Which is why I'm perplexed that you let drunken Reds sit around here in your own headquarters. They all belong west of the Mizzipy, and that's as plain as day. We won't have peace and we won't have civilization until that's done. And since Appalachee and the U.S. alike are convinced that Reds can be treated like human beings, we've got to solve our Red problem *before* we join the union. It's as simple as that."

"Well, you see?" said Harrison. "We already agree completely."

"Then why is it that you keep your headquarters as full of Reds as Independence Street in Washington City? They have Cherriky men acting as clerks and even holding government offices in Appalachee, right in the capital, jobs that white men ought to have, and then I come here and find you keep Reds around you, too."

"Cool down, Mr. Jackson, cool right down. Don't the King keep his Blacks there in his palace in Virginia?"

"His Blacks are slaves. Everybody knows you can't make slaves out of Reds. They aren't intelligent enough to be properly trained."

"Well, you just set yourself there in that chair, Mr. Jackson, and I'll make my point the best way I know how, by showing you two prime Shaw-Nee specimens. Just set down."

Jackson picked up the chair and moved it to the opposite side of the room from Hooch. It made something gnaw in Hooch's gut, the way Jackson acted. Men like Jackson were so upright and honest-seeming, but Hooch knew that there wasn't no such thing as a good man, just a man who wasn't bought yet, or wasn't in deep enough trouble, or didn't have the guts to reach out and take what he wanted. That's all that virtue ever boiled down to, so far as Hooch ever saw in his life. But here was Jackson, putting on airs and calling for Bill Harrison to arrest him! Think of that, a stranger from Tennizy country coming up here and waving around a warrant from an Appalachee judge, of all things, which didn't have no more force in Wobbish country than if it was written by the king of Ethiopia. Well, Mr. Jackson, it's a long way home from here, and we'll just see if you don't have some kind of accident along the way.

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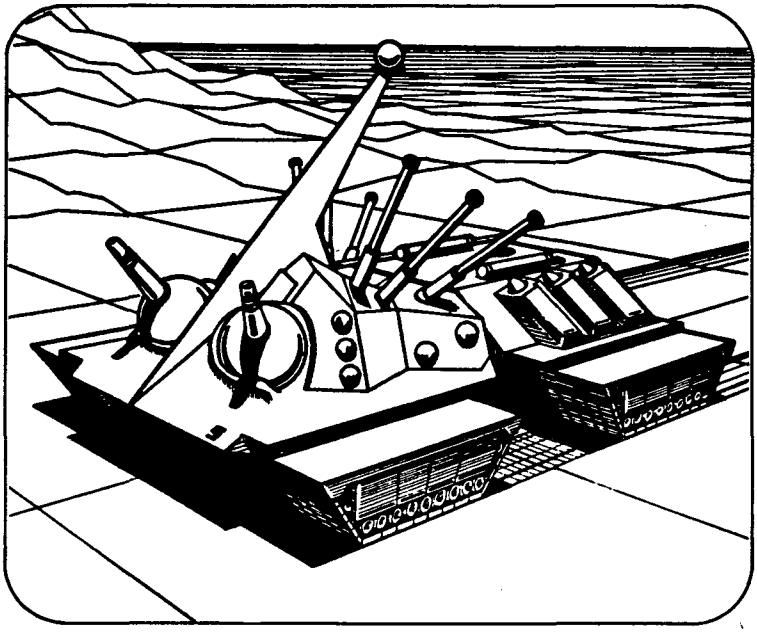

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No, no, no, Hooch told himself silently. Getting even don't amount to nothing in this world. Getting even only gets you behind. The best revenge is to get rich enough to make them all call you sir, that's how you get even with these boys. No bushwhacking. If you ever get a name for bushwhacking, that's the end of you, Hooch Palmer.

So Hooch sat there and smiled, as Harrison called for his aide. "Why don't you invite Lolla-Wossiky in here? And while you're at it, tell his brother he can come in, too."

Lolla-Wossiky's brother—had to be the defiant Red who was standing up against the wall. Funny, how two peas from the same pod could grow up so different.

Lolla-Wossiky came in fawning, smiling, looking quickly from one white face to the next, wondering what they wanted, how he could make them happy enough to reward him with whisky. It was written all over him, how thirsty he was, even though he was already so drunk he didn't walk straight. Or had he already drunk so much likker that he couldn't walk straight even when he was sober? Hooch wondered—but soon enough he knew the answer. Harrison reached into the bureau behind him and took out a jug and a cup. Lolla-Wossiky watched the brown liquid splash into the cup, his one eye so intense it was like he could taste the likker by vision alone. But he didn't take even a single step toward the cup. Harrison reached out and set the cup on the table near the Red, but still the man stood there, smiling, looking now at the cup, now at Harrison, waiting, waiting.

Harrison turned to Jackson and smiled. "Lolla-Wossiky is just about the most civilized Red in the whole Wobbish country, Mr. Jackson. He never takes things that don't belong to him. He never speaks except when spoken to. He obeys and does whatever I tell him. And all he ever asks in return is just a cup of liquid. Doesn't even have to be good likker. Corn whisky or bad Spanish rum are just fine with him, isn't that right, Lolla-Wossiky?"

"Very so right, Mr. Excellency," said Lolla-Wossiky. His speech was surprisingly clear, for a Red. Especially a drunken Red.

Hooch saw Jackson study the one-eyed Red with disgust. Then the Tennizy lawyer's gaze shifted to the door, where the tall, strong, defiant Red was standing. Hooch enjoyed watching Jackson's face. From disgust, his expression plainly changed to anger. Anger and, yes, fear. Oh, yes, you aren't fearless, Mr. Jackson. You know what Lolla-Wossiky's brother is. He's your enemy, and my enemy, the enemy of every white man who ever wants to have this land, because sometime this uppity Red is going to put his tommy-hawk in your head and peel off your scalp real slow, and he won't sell it to no Frenchman, neither, Mr. Jackson, he'll keep it and give it to his children, and say to them, "This is the only good

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white man. This is the only white man who doesn't break his word. This is what you do to white men." Hooch knew it, Harrison knew it, and Jackson knew it. That young buck by the door was death. That young buck was white men forced to live east of the mountains, all crammed into the old towns with all their lawyers and professors and high-toned people who never gave you room to breathe. People like Jackson himself, in fact. Hooch gave one snort of laughter at that idea. Jackson was exactly the sort of man that folks moved west to get away from. How far west will I have to go before the lawyers lose the trail and get left behind?

"I see you've noticed Ta-Kumsaw. Lolla-Wossiky's older brother, and my very, very dear friend. Why, I've known that lad since before his father died. Look what a strong buck he's grown into!"

If Ta-Kumsaw noticed how he was being ridiculed, he showed no sign of it. He looked at no person in the room. Instead he looked out the window on the wall behind the governor. Didn't fool Hooch, though. Hooch knew what he was watching, and had a pretty good idea what Ta-Kumsaw was feeling, too. These Reds, they took family real serious. Ta-Kumsaw was secretly watching his brother, and if Lolla-Wossiky was too likkered up to feel any shame, that just meant Ta-Kumsaw would feel it all the more.

"Ta-Kumsaw," said Harrison. "You see I've poured a drink for you. Come, sit down and drink, and we can talk."

At Harrison's words, Lolla-Wossiky went rigid. Was it possible that the drink wasn't for him, after all? But Ta-Kumsaw did not twitch, did not show any sign that he heard.

"You see?" said Harrison to Jackson. "Ta-Kumsaw isn't even civilized enough to sit down and have a convivial drink with friends. But his younger brother is civilized, isn't he? Aren't you, Lolly? I'm sorry I don't have a chair for you, my friend, but you can sit on the floor under my table here, sit right at my feet, and drink this rum."

"You are remarkable kind," said Lolla-Wossiky in that clear, precise speech of his. To Hooch's surprise, the one-eyed Red did not scramble for the cup. Instead he walked carefully, each step a labor of precision, and took the cup between only slightly trembling hands. Then he knelt down before Harrison's table and, still balancing the cup, sank into a seated position, his legs crossed.

But he was still out in front of the table, not under it, and Harrison pointed this out to him. "I'd like you to sit under my table," said the governor. "I'd regard it as a great courtesy to me if you would."

So Lolla-Wossiky bent his head almost down into his lap and waddled on his buttocks until he was under the table. It was very hard for him to drink in that position, since he couldn't lift his head straight up, let

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alone tip it back to drain the cup. But he managed anyway, drinking carefully, rocking from one side to the other.

All this time, Ta-Kumsaw said nary a word. Didn't even show that he saw how his brother was being humiliated. Oh, thought Hooch, oh the fire that burns in that boy's heart. Harrison's taking a real risk here. Besides, if he's Lolla-Wossiky's brother, he must know Harrison shot his daddy during the Red uprisings back in the nineties sometime, when General Wayne was fighting the French. A man doesn't forget that kind of thing, especially a Red man, and here Harrison was testing him, testing him right to the limit.

"Now that everybody's comfortable," said Harrison, "why don't you set down and tell us what you came for, Ta-Kumsaw."

Ta-Kumsaw didn't sit. Didn't close the door, didn't take a step farther into the room. "I speaking for Shaw-Nee, Caska-Skeeaw, Pee-Orawa, Winny-Baygo."

"Now, Ta-Kumsaw, you know that you don't even speak for all the Shaw-Nee, and you sure don't speak for the others."

"All tribes who sign General Wayne's treaty." Ta-Kumsaw went on as if Harrison hadn't said a thing. "Treaty says Whites don't sell whisky to Reds."

"That's right," said Harrison. "And we're keeping that treaty."

Ta-Kumsaw didn't look at Hooch, but he lifted his hand and pointed at him. Hooch felt the gesture as if Ta-Kumsaw had actually touched him with that finger. It didn't make him mad this time, it plain scared him. He heard that some Reds had a come-hither so strong that didn't no hex protect you, so they could lure you off into the woods alone and slice you to bits with their knives, just to hear you scream. That's what Hooch thought of, when he felt Ta-Kumsaw point to him with hatred.

"Why are you pointing at my old friend Hooch Palmer?" asked Harrison.

"Oh, I reckon nobody likes me today," Hooch said. He laughed, but it didn't dispel his fear after all.

"He bring his flatboat of whisky," said Ta-Kumsaw.

"Well, he brought a lot of things," said Harrison. "But if he brought whisky, it'll be delivered to the sutler here in the fort and not a drop of it will be sold to the Reds, you can be sure. We uphold that treaty, Ta-Kumsaw, even though you Reds aren't keeping it too good lately. It's got so flatboats can't travel alone down the Hio no more, my friend, and if things don't let up, I reckon the army's going to have to take some action."

"Burn a village?" asked Ta-Kumsaw. "Shoot down our babies? Our old people? Our women?"

"Where do you get these ideas," said Harrison. He sounded downright

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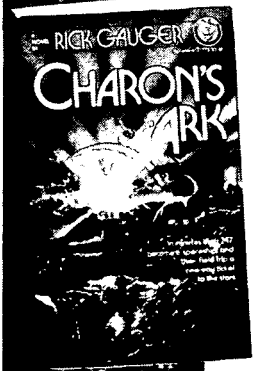

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offended, even though Hooch knew right well that Ta-Kumsaw was describing the typical army operation.

Hooch spoke right up, in fact. "You Reds burn out helpless farmers in their cabins and pioneers on their flatboats, don't you? So why do you figure your villages should be any safer, you tell me that!"

Ta-Kumsaw still didn't look at him. "English law says, Kill the man who steals your land, you are not bad. Kill a man to steal his land, and you are very bad. When we kill White farmers, we are not bad. When you kill Red people who live here a thousand years, you are very bad. Treaty says, stay all east of My-Ammy River, but they don't stay, and you help them."

"Mr. Palmer here spoke out of turn," said Harrison. "No matter what you savages do to our people—torturing the men, raping the women, carrying off the children to be slaves—we don't make war on the helpless. We are civilized, and so we behave in a civilized manner."

"This man will sell his whisky to Red men. Make them lie in dirt like worms. He will give his whisky to Red women. Make them weak like bleeding deer, do all things he says."

"If he does, we will arrest him," said Harrison. "We will try him and punish him for breaking the law."

"If he does, you *not* will arrest him," said Ta-Kumsaw. "You will share pelts with him. You will keep him safe."

"Don't call me a liar," said Harrison.

"Don't lie," said Ta-Kumsaw.

"If you go around talking to white men like this, Ta-Kumsaw, old boy, one of them's going to get real mad at you and blast your head off."

"Then I know you will arrest him. I know you will try him and punish him for breaking the law." Ta-Kumsaw said it without cracking a smile, but Hooch had traded with the Reds enough to know their kind of joke.

Harrison nodded gravely. It occurred to Hooch that Harrison might not realize it was a joke. He might think Ta-Kumsaw actually believed it. But no, Harrison knew he and Ta-Kumsaw were lying to each other; and it came into Hooch's mind that when both parties are lying and they both know the other party's lying, it comes powerful close to being the same as telling the truth.

What was really hilarious was that Jackson actually *did* believe all this stuff. "That's right," said the Tennizy lawyer. "Rule of law is what separates civilized men from savages. Red men just aren't advanced enough yet, and if you aren't willing to be subject to white man's law, you'll just have to make way."

For the first time, Ta-Kumsaw looked one of them in the eye. He stared coldly at Jackson and said, "These men are liars. They know what is

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true, but they say it is not true. You are not a liar. You believe what you say."

Jackson nodded gravely. He looked so vain and upright and godly that Hooch couldn't resist it, he hottened up the chair under Jackson just a little, just enough that Jackson had to wiggle his butt. That took off a few layers of dignity. But Jackson still kept his airs. "I believe what I say because I tell the truth."

"You say what you believe. But still it is not true. What is your name?"

"Andrew Jackson."

Ta-Kumsaw nodded. "Hickory."

Jackson looked downright surprised and pleased that Ta-Kumsaw had heard of him. "Some folks call me that." Hooch hottened up his chair a little more.

"Blue Jacket says, Hickory is a good man."

Jackson still had no idea why his chair was so uncomfortable, but it was too much for him. He popped right up, stepped away from the chair, kind of shaking his legs with each step to cool himself off. But still he kept talking with all the dignity in the world. "I'm glad Blue Jacket feels that way. He's chief of the Shaw-Nee down in Tennizy country, isn't he?"

"Sometimes," said Ta-Kumsaw.

"What do you mean sometimes," said Harrison. "Either he's a chief or he isn't."

"When he talks straight, he is chief," said Ta-Kumsaw.

"Well, I'm glad to know he trusts me," said Jackson. But his smile was a little wan, because Hooch was busy hotting up the floor under his feet, and unless old Hickory could fly, he wasn't going to be able to get away from *that*. Hooch didn't plan to torment him long. Just until he saw Jackson take a couple of little hops, and then try to explain why he was dancing right there in front of a young Shaw-Nee warrior and Governor William Henry Harrison.

Hooch's little game got spoiled, though, cause at that very moment, Lolla-Wossiky toppled forward and rolled out from under the table. He had an idiotic grin on his face, and his eyes were closed. "Blue Jacket!" he cried. Hooch took note that drink had finally slurred his speech. "Hickory!" shouted the one-eyed Red.

"You are my enemy," said Ta-Kumsaw, ignoring his brother.

"You're wrong," said Harrison. "I'm your friend. Your enemy is up north of here, in the town of Vigor Church. Your enemy is that renegade Armor-of-God Weaver."

"Armor-of-God Weaver sells no whisky to Reds."

"Neither do I," said Harrison. "But he's the one making maps of all the country west of the Wobbish. So he can parcel it up and sell it after he's killed all the Reds."

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Ta-Kumsaw paid no attention to Harrison's attempt to turn him against his rival to the north. "I come to warn you," said Ta-Kumsaw.

"Warn me?" said Harrison. "You, a Shaw-Nee who doesn't speak for anybody, you *warn* me, right here in my stockade, with a hundred soldiers ready to shoot you down if I say the word?"

"Keep the treaty," said Ta-Kumsaw.

"We *do* keep the treaty! It's you who always break the treaties!"

"Keep the treaty," said Ta-Kumsaw.

"Or what?" asked Jackson.

"Or every Red west of the mountains will come together and cut you to pieces."

Harrison leaned back his head and laughed and laughed. Ta-Kumsaw showed no expression.

"*Every* Red, Ta-Kumsaw?" asked Harrison. "You mean, even Lolly here? Even my pet Shaw-Nee, my tame Red, even *him*?

For the first time Ta-Kumsaw looked at his brother, who lay snoring on the floor. "The sun comes up every day, White man. But is it tame? Rain falls down every time. But is it tame?"

"Excuse me, Ta-Kumsaw, but this one-eyed drunk here is as tame as my horse."

"Oh yes," said Ta-Kumsaw. "Put on the saddle. Put on the bridle. Get on and ride. See where this tame Red goes. Not where you want."

"Exactly where I want," said Harrison. "Keep that in mind. Your brother is always within my reach. And if you ever get out of line, boy, I'll arrest him as your conspirator and hang him high."

Ta-Kumsaw smiled thinly. "You think so. Lolla-Wossiky thinks so. But he will learn to see with his other eye before you ever lay a hand on him."

Then Ta-Kumsaw turned around and left the room. Quietly, smoothly, not stalking, not angry, not even closing the door behind him. He moved with grace, like an animal, like a very dangerous animal. Hooch saw a cougar once, years ago, when he was alone in the mountains. That's what Ta-Kumsaw was. A killer cat.

Harrison's aide closed the door.

Harrison turned to Jackson and smiled. "You see?" he said.

"What am I supposed to see, Mr. Harrison?"

"Do I have to spell it out for you, Mr. Jackson?"

"I'm a lawyer. I like things spelled out. If you can spell."

"I can't even *read*," said Hooch cheerfully.

"You also can't keep your mouth shut," said Harrison. "I'll spell it out for you, Jackson. You and your Tennizy boys, you talk about moving the Reds west of the Mizzipy. Now let's say we do that. What are you going to do, keep soldiers all the way up and down the river, watching all day

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and all night? They'll be back across this river whenever they want, raiding, robbing, torturing, killing."

"I'm not a fool," said Jackson. "It will take a great bloody war, but when we get them across the river, they'll be broken. And men like that Ta-Kumsaw—they'll be dead or discredited."

"You think so? Well, during that great bloody war you talk about, a lot of white boys will die, and white women and children, too. But I have a better idea. These Reds suck down likker like a calf sucks down milk from his mama's tit. Two years ago there was a thousand Pee-Ankashaw living east of the My-Ammy River. Then they started getting likkered up. They stopped working, they stopped eating, they got so weak that the first little sickness came through here, it wiped them out. Just wiped them out. If there's a Pee-Ankashaw left alive here, I don't know about it. Same thing happened up north, to the Chippy-Wa, only it was French traders done it to them. And the best thing about likker is, it kills off the Reds and not a white man dies."

Jackson rose slowly to his feet. "I reckon I'll have to take three baths when I get home," he said, "and even then I still won't feel clean."

Hooch was delighted to see that Harrison was really mad. He rose to his feet and shouted at Jackson so loud that Hooch could feel his chair shake. "Don't get high and mighty with me, you hypocrite! You want them all dead, just like I do! There's no difference between us."

Jackson stopped at the door and eyed the governor with disgust. "The assassin, Mr. Harrison, the *poisoner*, he can't see the difference between himself and a soldier. But the soldier can."

Unlike Ta-Kumsaw, Jackson was not above slamming the door.

Harrison sank back down into his chair. "Hooch, I've got to say, I don't much like that fellow."

"Never mind," said Hooch. "He's with you."

Harrison smiled slowly. "I know. When it comes to war, we'll all be together. Except for maybe that Red-kisser up in Vigor Church."

"Even him," said Hooch. "Once a war starts, the Reds won't be able to tell one white man from another. Then his people will start dying just like ours. Then Armor-of-God Weaver will fight."

"Yeah, well, if Jackson and Weaver would likker up their Reds the way we're doing ours, there wouldn't have to *be* a war."

Hooch aimed a mouthful at the spittoon and didn't miss by much. "That Red, that Ta-Kumsaw."

"What about him?" asked Harrison.

"He worries me."

"Not me," said Harrison. "I've got his brother here passed out on my floor. Ta-Kumsaw won't do nothing."

"When he pointed at me, I felt his finger touch me from across the

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room. I think he's maybe got a come-hither. Or a far-touch. I think he's dangerous."

"You don't believe in all that hexery, do you, Hooch? You're such an educated man, I thought you were above that kind of superstition."

"I'm not and neither are you, Bill Harrison. You had a doodlebug tell you where firm ground was so you could build this stockade, and when your first wife had her babies, you had a torch in to see how the baby was laying in the womb."

"I warn you," said Harrison, "to make no more comment about my wife."

"Which one, now, Bill? The hot or the cold?"

Harrison swore a good long string of oaths at that. Oh, Hooch was delighted, Hooch was pleased. He had such knack for hotting things up, yes sir, and it was more fun hotting up a man's temper, because there wasn't no *flame* then, just a lot of steam, a lot of hot air.

Well, Hooch let old Bill Harrison jaw on for a while. Then he smiled and raised his hands like he was surrendering. "Now, you know I didn't mean no harm, Bill. I just didn't know as how you got so prissy these days. I figured we both know where babies grow, how they got in there, and how they come out, and your women don't do it any different than mine. And when she's lying there screaming, you know you've got a midwife there who knows how to cast a sleep on her, or do a pain-away, and when the baby's slow to come you've got a torch telling where it lays. And so you listen to me, Bill Harrison. That Ta-Kumsaw, he's got some kind of knack in him, some kind of power. He's more than he seems."

"Is he now, Hooch? Well maybe he is and maybe he ain't. But he said Lolla-Wossiky would see with his other eye before I laid a hand on him, and it won't be long before I prove that he's no prophet."

"Speaking of old one-eye here, he's starting to fart something dreadful."

Harrison called for his aide. "Send in Corporal Withers and four soldiers, at once."

Hooch admired the way Harrison kept military discipline. It wasn't thirty seconds before the soldiers were there, Corporal Withers saluting and saying, "Yes, sir, General Harrison."

"Have three of your men carry this animal out to the stable for me."

Corporal Withers obeyed instantly, pausing only to say, "Yes, sir, General Harrison."

General Harrison. Hooch smiled. He knew that Harrison's only commission was as a colonel under General Wayne during the last French war, and he didn't amount to much even then. General. Governor. What a pompous—

But Harrison was talking to Withers again, and looking at Hooch as

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he did so. "And now you and Private Dickey will kindly arrest Mr. Palmer here and lock him up."

"Arrest me!" shouted Hooch. "What are you talking about!"

"He carries several weapons, so you'll have to search him thoroughly," said Harrison. "I suggest stripping him here before you take him to the lock-up, and leave him stripped. Don't want this slippery old boy to get away."

"What are you arresting me for!"

"Why, we have a warrant for your arrest for unpaid debts," said Harrison. "And you've also been accused of selling whisky to Reds. We'll naturally have to seize all your assets—those suspicious looking kegs my boys've been hauling into the stockade all day—and sell them to make good the debt. If we can sell them for enough, and we can clear you of those ugly charges of likkering up the Reds, why, we'll let you go."

Then Harrison walked on out of his office. Hooch cussed and spit and made remarks about Harrison's wife and mother, but Private Dickey was holding real tight to a musket, and that musket had a bayonet attached to the business end; so Hooch submitted to the stripping and the search. It got worse, though, and he cussed again when Withers marched him right across the stockade, stark naked, and didn't give him so much as a blanket when he locked him into a storage room. A storage room filled with empty kegs from the *last* shipment of likker.

He sat in that lock-up room for two days before his trial, and for the first while there was murder in his heart. He had a lot of ideas for revenge, you can bet. He thought of setting fire to the lace curtains in Harrison's house, or burning the shed where the whisky was kept, starting all kinds of fire. Cause what good is it to be a spark if you can't use it to get even with folks who pretend to be your friends and then lock you into jail?

But he didn't start no fires, because Hooch was no fool. Partly, he knew that if a fire once got started anywhere in the stockade, there was a good chance it'd spread from one end to the other inside half an hour. And there was a good chance that while everybody's rushing around to save their wives and children and gunpowder and likker, they might not remember about one whisky trader locked up in a storage room. Hooch didn't hanker to die in a fire of his own setting—that wasn't no kind of vengeance. Time enough to start fires when he had a noose around his neck someday, but he wasn't going to risk burning to death just to get even over something like this.

But the main reason he didn't start a fire wasn't fear, it was plain business sense. Harrison was doing this to show Hooch that he didn't like the way Hooch delayed shipments of likker to jack up the price.

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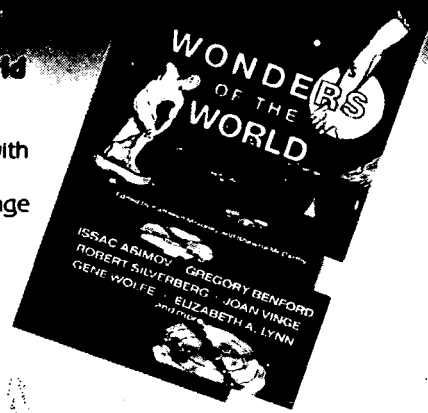

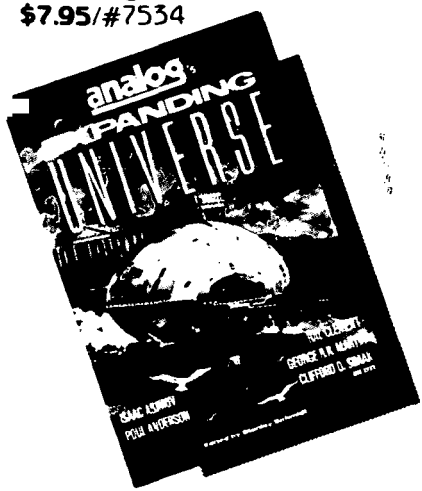

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Harrison was showing him that he had real power, and all Hooch had was money. Well, let Harrison play at being a powerful man. Hooch knew some things, too. He knew that someday the Wobbish country would petition the U.S. Congress in Philadelphia to become a state. And when it did, a certain William Henry Harrison would have his little heart set on being governor. And Hooch had seen enough elections back in Susquehanny and Pennsylvania and Appalachee to know that you can't get votes without silver dollars to pass around. Hooch would have those silver dollars. And when the time came, he might pass around those silver dollars to Harrison voters; and then again he might not. He just might not. He might help another man sit in the governor's mansion, someday when Carthage was a real city and Wobbish was a real state, and then Harrison would have to sit there the rest of his life and remember what it was like to be able to lock people up, and he would grind his teeth in anger at how men like Hooch took all that away from him.

That's how Hooch kept himself entertained, sitting in that lock-up room for two long days and nights.

Then they hauled him out and brought him into court—unshaven, dirty, his hair wild and his clothes all wrinkled up. General Harrison was the judge, the jury was all in uniform, and the defense attorney was—Andrew Jackson! It was plain Governor Bill was trying to make Hooch get mad and start in ranting, but Hooch wasn't born yesterday. He knew that whatever Harrison had in mind, it wouldn't do no good to yell about it. Just sit tight and put up with it.

It took only a few minutes.

Hooch listened with a straight face as a young lieutenant testified that all Hooch's whisky had been sold to the sutler at exactly the price it sold for last time. According to the legal papers, Hooch didn't make a penny more from having kept them waiting four months between shipments. Well, thought Hooch, that's fair enough, Harrison's letting me know how he wants things run. So he didn't say a word. Harrison looked as merry as you please, behind his magisterial solemnity. Enjoy yourself, thought Hooch. You can't make me mad.

But he *could*, after all. They took 220 dollars right off the top and handed it over to Andrew Jackson right there in court. Counted out eleven gold twenty-dollar coins. That caused Hooch physical pain, to see that fiery metal dropping into Jackson's hands. He couldn't keep his silence then. But he did manage to keep his voice low and mild-sounding. "It don't seem regular to me," he said, "to have the plaintiff acting as defense attorney."

"Oh, he's not your defense attorney on the debt charges," said His Honor Judge Harrison. "He's just your defense attorney on the likker charges." Then Harrison grinned and gaveled that matter closed.

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The likker business didn't take much longer. Jackson carefully presented all the same invoices and receipts to prove that every keg of whisky was sold to the sutler of Carthage Fort, and not a speck of it to any Reds. "Though I will say," said Jackson, "that the amount of whisky represented by these receipts seems like enough for three years for an army ten times this size."

"We've got a bunch of hard-drinking soldiers," said Judge Harrison. "And I reckon that likker won't last six months. But not a drop to the Reds, Mr. Jackson, you may be sure!"

Then he dismissed all charges against Hooch Palmer, alias Ulysses Brock. "But let this be a lesson to you, Mr. Palmer," said Harrison in his best judicial voice. "Justice on the frontier is swift and sure. See to it you pay your debts. And avoid even the appearance of evil."

"Sure enough," said Hooch cheerfully. Harrison had rolled him over good, but everything had worked out fine. Oh, the 220 dollars bothered him, and so did the two days in jail, but Harrison didn't mean for Hooch to suffer much. Because what Jackson didn't know, and no one else saw fit to mention, was that Hooch Palmer happened to have the contract as sutler for the U.S. Army in Wobbish Territory. All those documents that proved he hadn't sold the likker to the Reds really showed that he sold the likker to himself—and at a profit, too. Now Jackson would head on home and Hooch would settle down in the sutler's store, selling likker to the Reds at extortionate prices, splitting the profits with Governor Bill and watching the Reds die like flies. Harrison had played his little joke on Hooch, right enough, but he'd played an even bigger one on old Hickory.

Hooch made sure to be at the wharf when they ferried Jackson back across the Hio. Jackson had brought along two big old mountain boys with rifles, no less. Hooch took note that one of them looked to be half Red himself, probably a Cherriky half-breed—there was lots of that kind of thing in Appalachee, white men actually *marrying* squaws like as if they was real women. And both those rifles had "Eli Whitney" stamped on the barrel, which meant they was made in the state of Irrakwa, where this Whitney fellow set up shop making guns so fast he made the price drop; and the story was that all his workmen was *women*, Irrakwa squaws, if you can believe it. Jackson could talk all he wanted about pushing the Reds west of the Mizzipy, but it was already too late. Ben Franklin did it, by letting the Irrakwa have their own state up north, and Tom Jefferson made it worse by letting the Cherriky be full voting citizens in Appalachee when they fought their revolution against the King. Treat them Reds like citizens and they start to figure they got the same rights as a white man. There was no way to have an orderly society if that sort of thing caught on. Why, next thing you know them Blacks'd

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start trying to get out of being slaves, and first thing you know you'd sit down at the bar in a saloon and you'd look to your left and there'd be a *Red*, and you'd look to your right and there'd be a *Black*, and that was just plain against nature.

There went Jackson, thinking he was going to save the white man from the Red, when he was traveling with a half-breed and toting Red-made rifles. Worst of all, Jackson had eleven gold coins in his saddle pouch, coins that properly belonged to Hooch Palmer. It made Hooch so mad he couldn't think straight.

So Hooch hotted up that saddle pouch, right where the metal pin held it onto the saddle. He could feel it from here, the leather charring, turning ash-black and stiff around that pin. Pretty soon, as the horse walked along, that bag would drop right off. But since they was likely to notice it, Hooch figured he wouldn't stop with the pouch. He hotted up a whole lot of other places on that saddle, and on the other men's saddles, too. When they reached the other shore they mounted up and rode off, but Hooch knew they'd be riding bareback before they got back to Nashville. He most sincerely hoped that Jackson's saddle would break in such a way and at such a time that old Hickory would land on his butt or maybe even break his arm. Just thinking about the prospect made Hooch pretty cheerful. Every now and then it was kind of fun to be a spark. Take some pompous holy-faced lawyer down a peg.

Truth is, an honest man like Andrew Jackson just wasn't no match for a couple of scoundrels like Bill Harrison and Hooch Palmer. It was just a crying shame that the army didn't give no medals to soldiers who likkered their enemies to death instead of shooting them. Cause if they did, Harrison and Palmer would both be heroes, Hooch knew that for sure.

As it was, Hooch reckoned Harrison would find a way to make himself a hero out of all this anyway, while Hooch would end up with nothing but money. Well, that's how it goes, thought Hooch. Some people get the fame, and some people get the money. But I don't mind, as long as I'm not one of the people who end up with nothing at all. I sure never want to be one of them. And if I am, they're sure going to be sorry.

While Hooch was watching Jackson cross the river, Ta-Kumsaw watched the White whisky trader and knew what he was doing. So did most other Reds who cared to watch—those that were sober, anyway. White men did a lot of things that Red men didn't understand, but when they fiddled with things like fire, water, earth, and air, well, they couldn't hide it from a Red man.

Ta-Kumsaw didn't exactly *see* the burning of the saddle leather on Jackson's horse, or even feel the heat of it. Instead it was like a stirring,

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a tiny whirlwind, a little suction drawing his attention out to the water. A disturbance in the peacefulness of the land. Some Reds couldn't feel it as keenly as Ta-Kumsaw could, and others—not many—could sense it far more powerfully. Ta-Kumsaw's little brother, Lolla-Wossiky, had been one of those with a keen sense of those whirlpools, those eddies in the stream. Ta-Kumsaw remembered their father speaking of it, how Lolla-Wossiky would someday be a shaman, and Ta-Kumsaw would be a war-leader. That was before Lying-Mouth Harrison shot Pucky-Shinwa right before Lolla-Wossiky's eyes.

Ta-Kumsaw remembered that day. He had been off hunting, half a day's walk to the north, but he felt it as if the gun had been fired right behind him. When a White man laid a hex or a curse or cast a doodlebug, it felt to Ta-Kumsaw like an itch under his skin, but when a White man killed, it was like a knife stabbing. He was with his brother Methowa-Tasky, and he called to him. "Did you feel it?" Methowa-Tasky's eyes went wide. He had not. But even then, even at that age—not yet thirteen—Ta-Kumsaw had no doubt of himself. He had felt it; it was true; a murder had been done, and he must go to the dying man.

He led the way, running through the forest. As always with a Red man, his harmony with the woodland was complete. He did not have to think about where he placed his feet; he knew that the twigs under his feet would soften and bend, the leaves would moisten and not rustle, the branches he brushed aside would quickly go back to their proper place and leave no sign of his passing. Some White men prided themselves that they could move as quiet as a Red, and in truth some of them could—but they did it by moving slowly, carefully, watching the ground, stepping around bushes. They never realized how little thought a Red man took for making no sound, for leaving no trace.

What Ta-Kumsaw thought of was not his steps, not himself at all. It was the whirlpool sucking him downward, ever more powerfully, toward the place where the peace was torn open like a wound to let a murder through. By the time they got there, even Methowa-Tasky could feel it. There on the ground lay their father, a bullet through his face. And standing by him, silent and unseeing, was Lolla-Wossiky, ten years old.

Ta-Kumsaw carried his father's body home across his shoulders, like a deer. Methowa-Tasky led Lolla-Wossiky by the hand, for otherwise the boy would not move. Mother greeted them with great wails of grief, for she had also felt the death, but did not know it was her own husband until her sons brought him back. Mother tied her husband's corpse to Ta-Kumsaw's back; then Ta-Kumsaw climbed the tallest tree, and bound his father's corpse to the highest branch he could reach. It would have been very bad if he had climbed beyond his strength, and his father's body had fallen from his grasp. But Ta-Kumsaw did not climb beyond

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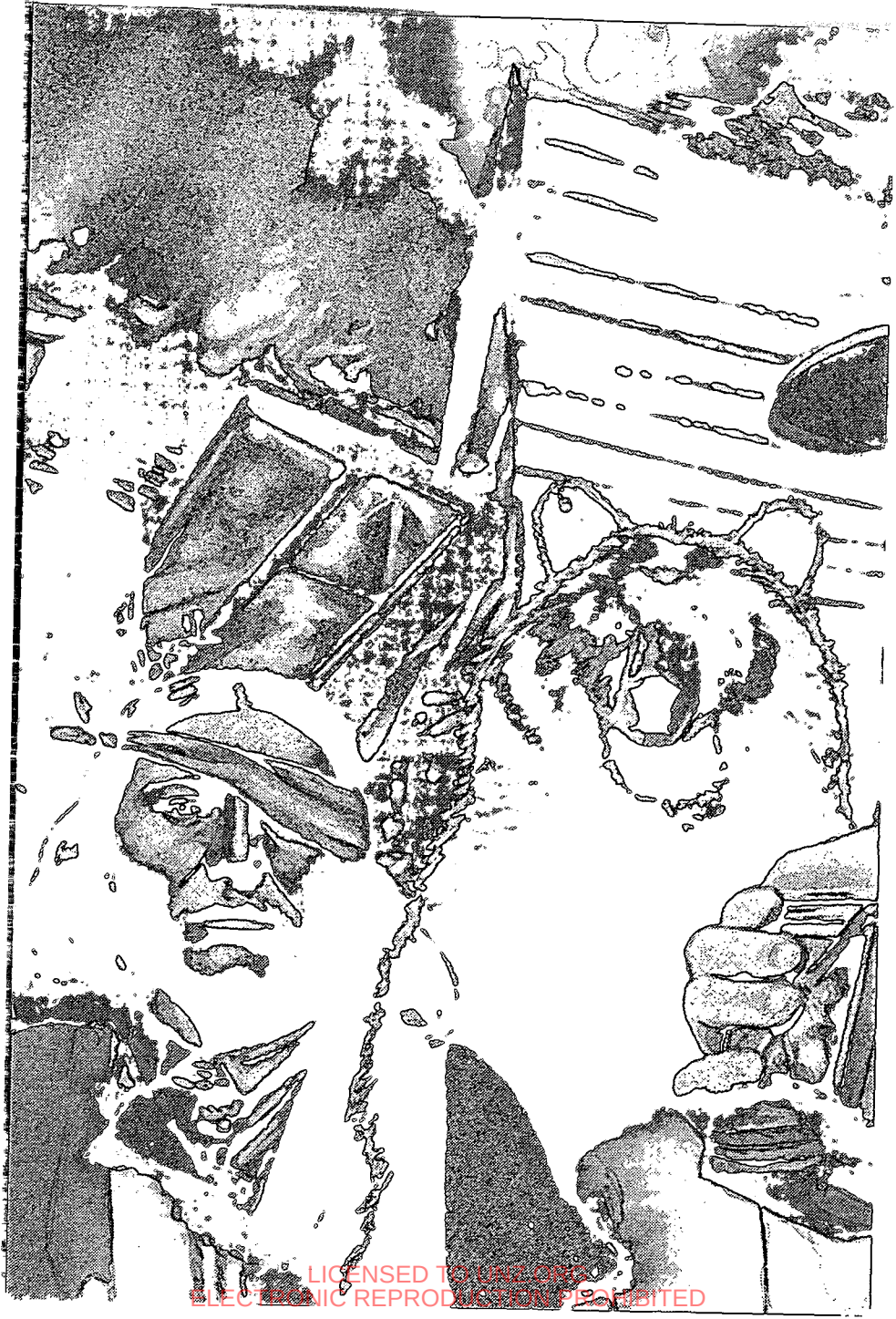

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his strength. And so he bound his father to a branch that was in constant sunlight. The birds and insects would eat of him; the sun and air would dry him; the rain would wash him downward to the earth. This was how Ta-Kumsaw gave his father back to the land.

But what could they do with Lolla-Wossiky? He said nothing, he wouldn't eat unless someone fed him, and if you didn't take his hand and lead him, he would stay in one place forever. Mother was frightened at what had happened to her son. Mother loved Ta-Kumsaw very much, more than any other mother in the tribe loved any other son; but even so, she loved Lolla-Wossiky more. How often had she told them how Lolla-Wossiky always cried the first time the air grew bitter cold each winter, and how she could never get him to stop, no matter how she covered him with bear skins and buffalo robes. Not until he was old enough to talk did he explain why he cried. "All the bees are dying," he said. That was Lolla-Wossiky, the only Shaw-Nee boy who ever felt the death of bees.

That was the boy who had stood beside his father when Colonel Bill Harrison shot him dead. If Ta-Kumsaw felt that murder like a knife wound, half a day's journey away, what did Lolla-Wossiky feel, standing so close, and already so sensitive? If he cried for the death of bees in winter, what did he feel when a White man murdered his father before his eyes?

After a few years, Lolla-Wossiky finally began to speak again, but the fire was gone from his eyes, and he was careless. He put his own eye out, by accident, because he tripped and fell on the short jagged stump of a broken bush. Tripped and fell! What Red man ever did that? It was as if Lolla-Wossiky had lost all feeling for the land, as if from being the most sensitive, he had become as dull as a White man.

Or maybe, Ta-Kumsaw thought, maybe the sound of that ancient gunshot is still ringing in his head so loud that he can't feel the tickling of the world around him. Not until he first tasted whisky had Lolla-Wossiky been able to take the sharpness off that pain.

That was why Ta-Kumsaw never beat Lolla-Wossiky for likkering, though he would beat any other Shaw-Nee, even his brother, even an old man, if he found him with the White man's poison in his hand.

But the White man never guessed at what the Red man saw and heard and felt. The White man brought death and emptiness to this place. The White man cut down wise old trees with much to tell; young saplings with many lifetimes of life ahead; and the White man never asked, Will you be glad to make a lodgehouse for me and my tribe? Hack and cut and chop and burn, that was the White man's way. Take from the forest, take from the land, take from the river, but put nothing back. The White man killed animals he didn't need, animals that did him no harm; yet

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if a bear woke hungry in the winter and took so much as a single young pig, the White man hunted him down and killed him in revenge. He never felt the balance of the land at all.

No wonder the land hated the White man! No wonder all the natural things of the land rebelled against his every step, crackling underfoot, bending the wrong way, shouting out to the Red man, Here was where the enemy stood! Here came the intruder, through these bushes, up this hill! The White man joked that some Reds seemed like they could even track a man on water, then laughed as if it weren't true. But it *was* true, for when a White man passed along a river or a lake, it bubbled and foamed and rippled loudly for hours after he had passed.

Now Hooch Palmer, who carried poison with him wherever he went, now he stood making his silly little fires on another White man's saddles, and he thought that no one knew. These White men with their pathetic little knacks. These White men with their hexes and their wardings. They didn't realize that their hexes only worked to fend off *unnatural* things. If a thief came, knowing he was doing wrong, then a good strong fending hex would make his fear grow within him until he cried out and ran off. But the Red man was never a thief. The Red man always belonged wherever he was in this land. The hex was just a cold place, a stirring in the air, and nothing more.

Ta-Kumsaw watched Hooch turn away, return to the fort. Soon he would start selling his poison in earnest, and most of the Reds gathered around here would be drunk. Ta-Kumsaw would remain here, keeping watch. He did not have to speak to anyone. They only had to see him, and those with any courage left would turn away without likkering. He was a constant reproach to them.

He walked to the place where Hooch had stood, and let his calm replace the agitation that Hooch had left there. Soon the buzzing, furious insects became quieter; the smell of the likkery man settled; the water again lapped the shore with its random musical rhythm.

How easily the land was healed after the White man passed. If all the white men left today, by tomorrow the land would be at rest, and in a year it would not show any sign that the White man had ever been there. Even the ruins of the White man's buildings would be part of the land again, making homes for small animals and crumbling in the grip of the hungering vines. White man's metal would be rust; White man's stone work would be low hills and small caves; White man's murders would be wistful, beautiful notes in the song of the redbird—for the redbird remembered everything, turning it into goodness when it could.

All day Ta-Kumsaw stood outside the fort, watching Reds go in to buy their poison. Men and women from every tribe—Wee-aw and Kicky-Poo, Potty-Wottamee and Chippy-Wa, Winny-Baygo and Pee-Orawa—they

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went in carrying pelts or baskets and came out with no more than cups or jugs of likker, and sometimes with nothing, but he could feel how the Reds who drank this poison became unconnected to the land. They were not a disturbance the way the White man was; rather it was as if they had ceased to exist. The Red man who drank whisky was already dead, as far as the land knew. I stand here to watch the corpses walking their slow path to the grave, thought Ta-Kumsaw. He said this only inside his head, but the land felt his grief, and the breeze answered him by weeping through the leaves.

As dusk fell, a redbird came and walked on the dirt in front of Ta-Kumsaw.

Tell me a story, said the redbird in its silent way, its eyes cocked upward at the silent Red man.

You know my story before I tell it, said Ta-Kumsaw silently. You feel my tears before I shed them. You taste my blood before it is spilled.

Why do you grieve for Red men who are not of the Shaw-Nee?

Before the White man came, said Ta-Kumsaw silently, we did not see that all Red men were alike, brothers of the land, because we thought all creatures were this way; so we quarreled with other Red men the way the bear quarrels with the cougar, the way the muskrat scolds the beaver. Then the White man came, and I saw that all Red men are like twins compared to the White man.

What is the White man? What does he do?

The White man is like a human being, but he crushes all other living things under his feet.

Then why, O Ta-Kumsaw, when I look into your heart, why is it that you do not wish to hurt the White man, that you do not wish to kill the White man?

The White man doesn't know the evil that he does. The White man doesn't feel the peace of the land, so how can he tell that he's wrecking it? I can't blame the White man. But I can't let him stay. So when I make him leave this land, I'll do it without malice. I'll cause him no more pain than it takes to make him go away.

The redbird nodded once, twice, three times, four. Then it fluttered to a branch above Ta-Kumsaw's head and sang a short song. In those notes Ta-Kumsaw could not understand any words; but he could hear his own story being told. From now on, the song of every redbird in the land would include his story, for what one redbird knew, all of them remembered.

If anyone had been watching Ta-Kumsaw, they would have had no idea of what was going on. His face held no more expression than it had all day. He stood where he had been standing; a redbird landed near him, stayed awhile, sang, and went away.

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Yet it was the turning point of Ta-Kumsaw's life; he recognized it at once. Until this moment he had been a young man, a child. He had spoken as any Shaw-Nee could speak, but having spoken, he then kept still and let others decide. Now he would decide for himself, like a true chief, like a war chief. Not a chief of the Shaw-Nee, or even a chief of the Reds of this north country, but rather the chief of all Reds in the war against the White man. It was what he knew must happen, had known for many years; but until this moment he had thought that it would be another man, a chief like Cornstalk, Blackfish, or even a Cree-Ek or Chok-Taw from the south. But the redbird had come to *him*, Ta-Kumsaw, and put him in the song. Now wherever Ta-Kumsaw went through the land that knew the redbird song, his name would already be familiar to the wisest Red men. He was the chief of all tribes; the land had chosen him. As he stood there near the bank of the Hio, he felt like he was the face of the land; he felt like the fire of the sun, the breath of the air, the strength of the earth, the speed of the water all reached into him and looked out on the world through his eyes. I am the land; I am the hands and feet and mouth and voice of the land as it struggles to rid itself of the White man.

These were his thoughts.

He stood there until it was fully dark. The other Red men had returned to their lodges or their cabins to sleep—or to lie drunken and as good as dead until morning. Ta-Kumsaw came out of his redbird trance and heard laughter from the Red village, laughter and singing from the White soldiers inside the fort.

The thought came to him: If I had Hooch's knack for fire, I could burn down this place and kill all the people in it. But to think such a thing made him sick inside. White men could do such things because they were already broken off from the land. But the Red man had to keep harmony, or who would he be afterward? The White man could manipulate, twisting things in his unnatural way, sparking fires, calling water, forcing the land against its will; but the Red man could only take the land as far as it was willing to go. No great fires, unless they were caused by lightning from the sky. No great uprooting, unless the twisting wind from the southwest fell to earth and broke all things before it. No great digging on the face of the earth, unless the river rose up and swept the soil away. No great knocking down, unless the earth itself shrugged. What would the Red man do with a knack like Hooch's? He would become White, that's what he would do; and to wish for it, even for a moment, was to become that much whiter, that much less connected to the land. Was that a thought for the man the land had chosen to be chief of all Reds? More than ever he must remain in perfect peace.

Ashamed, he walked away from the place where he had stood so many

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hours. His legs were stiff, but he did not stagger; he forced his legs to move smoothly, and the ground yielded gently under his feet. The White man had to wear rough heavy boots to walk far in this land, because the dirt scuffed and tore at his feet; the Red man could wear the same moccasins for years, because the land was gentle and welcomed his step. And now, moving, Ta-Kumsaw felt soil, wind, river, and lightning all within him once again; the land within him, all things living, and he the hands and feet and face of the land. I must hold on to this, he told himself sternly. I must never let this go, or I'll have no worth at all.

There was a shout inside the fort. And more shouts:

"Thief! Thief!"

"Stop him!"

"He's got a keg!"

Curses, howls. Then the worst sound: a gunshot. Ta-Kumsaw waited for the sting of death. It didn't come.

What came instead was a shadowy form mounting the top of the parapet. Whatever man it was, he balanced a keg on his shoulders. For a moment he teetered on the very peak of the stockade poles, then jumped down. Ta-Kumsaw knew it was a Red man because he could jump from three man-heights, holding a heavy keg, and make almost no sound upon landing.

Deliberately or not, the fleeing thief ran straight to Ta-Kumsaw and stopped before him. Ta-Kumsaw looked down, and by starlight recognized the man.

"Lolla-Wossiky," he said.

"Got a keg," said Lolla-Wossiky.

"I should break that keg," said Ta-Kumsaw.

Lolla-Wossiky only cocked his head and regarded his brother. "Then I'd have to take another."

The White men chasing Lolla-Wossiky were at the gate, clamoring for the guard to open it. I have to remember this, thought Ta-Kumsaw. This is a way to get them to open the gate for me. Even as he thought that, however, he also took his brother under his arm, keg and all. Ta-Kumsaw felt the land still strong within him, and as he held his brother, the same sense of the land flowed into Lolla-Wossiky. Ta-Kumsaw heard him gasp.

The Whites ran out of the fort. Even though Ta-Kumsaw and Lolla-Wossiky stood in the open, in plain sight, the White soldiers did not see them. Or no, they *saw*; they simply did not notice the two Shaw-Nee. They ran past, shouting and firing randomly into the woods. They gathered near the brothers, so close they could have lifted an arm and touched them. But they did not lift their arms; they did not touch the Reds.

After a while the Whites gave up the search and returned to the fort, cursing and muttering.

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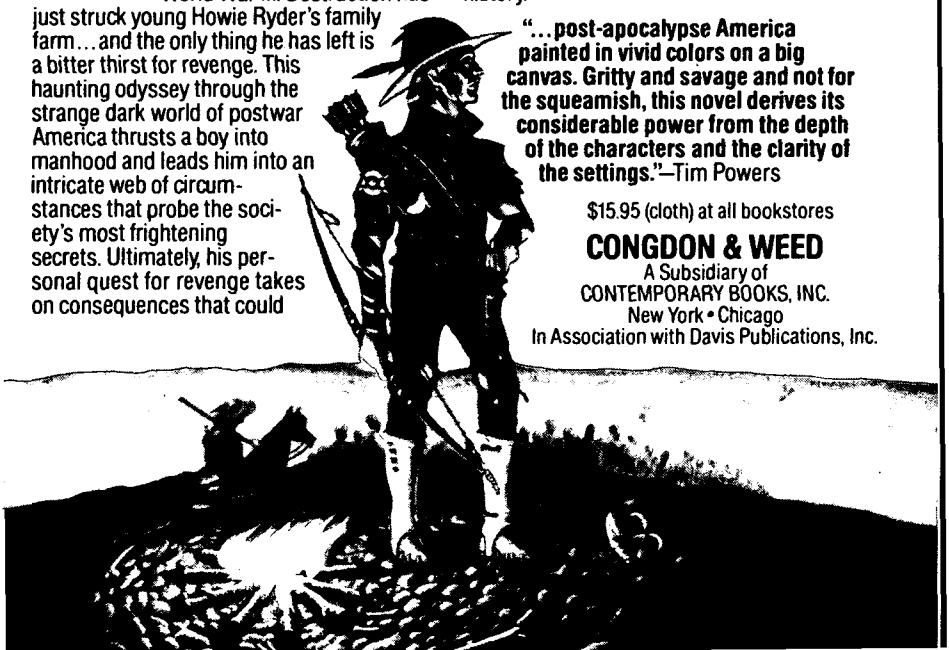

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"It was that one-eyed Red."

"The Shaw-Nee drunk."

"Lolla-Wossiky."

"If I find him, I'll kill him."

"Hang the thieving devil."

They said these things, and there was Lolla-Wossiky, not a stone's throw from them, holding the keg on his shoulder.

When the last White was inside the fort, Lolla-Wossiky giggled.

"You laugh with the White man's poison on your shoulders," said Ta-Kumsaw.

"I laugh with my brother's arm across my back," answered Lolla-Wossiky.

"Leave that whisky, Brother, and come with me," said Ta-Kumsaw. "The redbird heard my story, and remembers me in her song."

"Then I will listen to that song and be glad all the days of my life," said Lolla-Wossiky.

"The land is with me, Brother. I'm the face of the land, the land is my breath and blood."

"Then I will hear your heartbeat in the pulse of the wind," said Lolla-Wossiky.

"I will drive the White man back into the sea," said Ta-Kumsaw.

In answer, Lolla-Wossiky began to weep; not drunken weeping, but the dry, heavy sobs of a man burdened down with grief. Ta-Kumsaw tried to tighten his embrace, but his brother pushed him away. "Talk talk talk!" cried Lolla-Wossiky. "Strong man, great chief, where were you when White Murderer Harrison killed our father!"

Ta-Kumsaw was patient with his brother. "I don't hate that one man. He can't help being a White man, no more than a bear can help being a bear."

"Who is wise?" asked Lolla-Wossiky. "You hate all White men because some are evil; this one very bad man, you forgive him. I hate this one White man because he is evil, and I forgive all the others."

"He'll pay," said Ta-Kumsaw, "when I defeat him in battle, when a Red man beats him in war."

"He'll pay," said Lolla-Wossiky, "when he loses what he loves, the way I lost my father."

Then Lolla-Wossiky staggered off, still carrying the keg, into the darkness and the trees.

Everybody knows what happened to Lolla-Wossiky then, how he searched for his dream beast, and found it on the top of Eight-Face Mound. It was a one-eyed bear, and Lolla-Wossiky could only see him when he closed his good eye. The bear led him to the golden tree, where

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Lolla-Wossiky took one bite of the white fruit and never thirsted for likker again.

When he came down from Eight-Face Mound, he didn't call himself Lolla-Wossiky no more. Now he was Tenskwa-Tawa, "the door," and he began to teach Reds in every tribe to turn away from White man's ways, especially White man's likker. He told them about the visions he saw on Eight-Face Mound. Some of those visions were about the future, and folks took to calling him the Prophet.

When word started spreading about a one-eyed Red man who was called the Prophet, Governor Bill Harrison laughed and said, "Why, that ain't nobody but my old friend Lolla-Wossiky. When he runs out of that likker keg he stole from me, he'll quit seeing visions."

After a little while, though, Governor Harrison took note of how much store was set by the Prophet's words, and how the Reds spoke his name as reverent as a true Christian says the name of Jesus, and it got him somewhat alarmed. So he called together all the Reds around Carthage City—it was nigh onto a whisky day, so there wasn't no shortage of audience for him—and he gave them a speech. And in that speech he said one particular thing:

"If old Lolla-Wossiky is really a prophet, then he ought to do us a miracle, to show he's got more to him than just talk. You ought to make him cut off a hand or a foot and then restore it—that'd prove he was a prophet now, wouldn't it? Or better still, make him put out an eye and then heal it back. What's that you say? You mean he *already* had his eye put out? Well then he's ripe for a miracle, wouldn't you say? I say that as long as he's only got one eye, he ain't no prophet!"

Word of that came to the Prophet while he was teaching in a meadow that sloped gently down to the banks of the Tippy-Canoe, not a mile above where it poured into the waters of the Wobbish. It was some whisky-Reds brought that challenge, and they wasn't above mocking the Prophet and saying, "We came to see you make your eye whole."

The Prophet looked at them with his one good eye, and he said, "With this eye I see two Red men, weak and sick, slaves of likker, the kind of men who would mock me with the words of the man who killed my father." Then he closed his good eye, and he said, "With this eye I see two children of the land, whole and strong and beautiful, who love wives and children, and do good to all creatures." Then he opened his eye again and said, "Which eye is sick, and which eye sees true?" And they said to him, "Tenskwa-Tawa, you are a true prophet, and both your eyes are whole."

"Go tell White Murderer Harrison that I have performed the sign he asked for. And tell him another sign that he didn't ask for. Tell him that one day a fire will start in his own house. No man's hand will set this

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fire. Only rain will put out this fire, and before the fire dies, it will cut off something he loves more than a hand or a foot or an eye, and he will not have the power to restore it, either."

Hooch was astounded. "You mean you *don't want* the whole shipment?"

"We ain't used up what you sold us last time, Hooch," said the quartermaster. "Four barrels, that's all we want. More than we need, to tell the truth."

"I come down the river from Dekane, loaded up with likker, not stopping to sell any at the towns along the way, I make that *sacrifice* and you tell me—"

"Now, Hooch, I reckon we all know what kind of sacrifice that was." The quartermaster smirked a little. "I think you'll still recover your costs, pretty much, and if you don't, well, it just means you ain't been careful with the profits you've made off us afore."

"Who else is selling to you?"

"Nobody," said the quartermaster.

"I been coming to Carthage City for nigh on seven years now, and the last four years I've had a monopoly—"

"And if you'll pay heed, you'll remember that in the old days it used to be Reds what bought most of your likker."

Hooch looked around, walked away from the quartermaster, stood on the moist grassy ground of the riverbank. His flatboat rocked lazily on the water. There wasn't a Red to be seen, not a one, and that was a fact. But it wasn't no conspiracy, Hooch knew that. Reds had been slacking off the last few times he came. Always there used to be a few drunks, though.

He turned and shouted at the quartermaster. "You telling me there ain't no whisky-Reds left!"

"Sure there's whisky-Reds. But we ain't run out of whisky yet. So they're all off somewhere lying around being drunk."

Hooch cussed a little. "I'm going to see the Gov about this."

"Not today you ain't," said the quartermaster. "He's got himself a right busy schedule."

Hooch grinned nastily. "Oh, his schedule ain't too busy for *me*."

"It sure is, Hooch. He said it real specific."

"I reckon he might *think* his schedule is too busy, boy, but I reckon it just ain't so."

"Suit yourself," said the quartermaster. "Want me to unload the four barrels I got here?"

"No I don't," he said. Then he shouted at his poleboys, most specially at that Mike Fink, cause he looked to be the most likely to do murder

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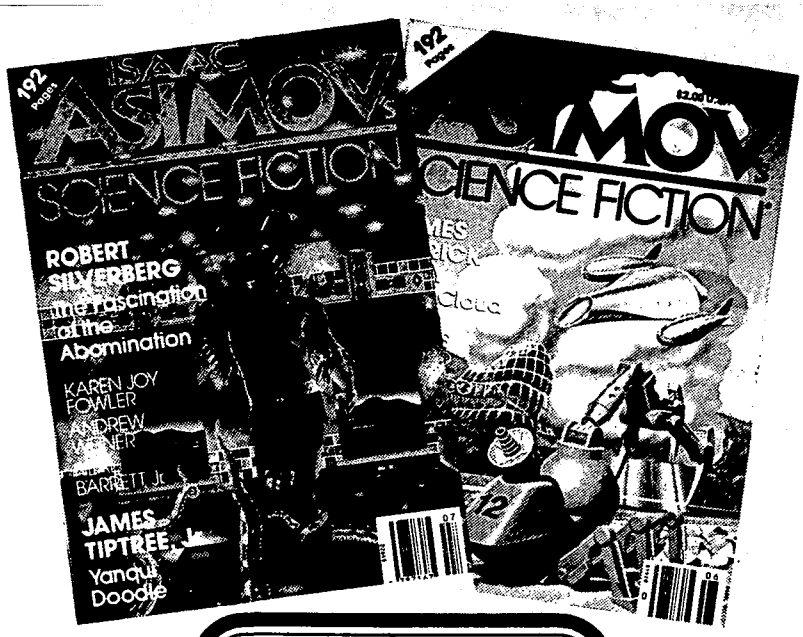

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if need be. "Anybody tries to lay a hand on that whisky, I want to see four bullet holes in their body before we chuck him in the water!"

The poleboys laughed and waved, except Mike Fink, who just sort of screwed his face up a little tighter. That was one mean old boy. They said you could tell which men had ever tried to wrassle Mike Fink, cause they got no ears. They said, if you want to get away from Fink with one ear still on your head, you got to wait till he's chewing on your first ear and then shoot him twice to distract him while you get away. A real good riverboy. But it made Hooch a little nervy to think what Fink might do if Hooch didn't have a payroll for him. Bill Harrison was going to pay for this whole load of likker, or there'd be real trouble.

Walking into the stockade, Hooch noticed a few things. The sign was the same one Harrison put up four years ago; it was getting ratty looking now, weathered up, but nobody changed it. Town wasn't growing, either. Everything had lost that new look, and now it was plain shabby.

Not like the way things were going back in Hio Territory. What used to be little stockade towns like this were turning into real towns, with painted houses, even a few cobbled streets. Hio was booming, at least the eastern part of it, close on to Suskwahenny, and folks speculated on how it wasn't far from statehood.

But there wasn't no boom going on in Carthage City.

Hooch walked along the main street inside the stockade. Still plenty of soldiers, and they still looked to have pretty good discipline, had to give Governor Bill credit for that. But where there used to be whisky-Reds sprawled all over the place, now there was river-rat types, uglier-looking than Mike Fink, unshaved, with a whisky stink as bad as any likkered-up Red ever had. Four old buildings had been turned into saloons, too, and they were doing good business in the middle of the afternoon.

That's why, thought Hooch. That's the trouble. Carthage City's gone and turned into a river town, a saloon town. Nobody wants to live around here, with all these river-rats. It's a whisky town.

But if it's a whisky town, Governor Bill ought to be buying whisky from me instead of this business about only wanting four barrels.

"You can wait if you want, Mr. Palmer, but the Governor won't see you today."

Hooch sat on the bench outside Harrison's office. He noticed that Harrison had switched offices with his adjutant. Gave up his nice big office in exchange for what? Smaller space, but—all interior walls. No windows. Now, that meant something. That meant Harrison didn't like having people look in on him. Maybe he was even afraid of getting himself killed.

Hooch sat there for two hours, watching soldiers come in and out. He tried not to get mad. Harrison did this now and then, making somebody

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sit around and wait so by the time they got in they was so upset they couldn't think straight. And sometimes he did it so a body'd get in a huff and go away. Or start to feeling small and unimportant, so Harrison could do some bullying. Hooch knew all this, so he tried to stay calm. But when it got on to evening, and the soldiers started changing shifts and going off duty, it was more than he could stand.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded of the corporal who sat at the front desk.

"Going off duty," said the corporal.

"But I'm still here," said Hooch.

"You can go off duty too, if you like," said the corporal.

That smart-mouthed answer was like a slap in the face. Time was these boys all tried to suck up to Hooch Palmer. Times were changing too fast. Hooch didn't like it at all. "I could buy your old mother and sell her at a profit," said Hooch.

That got to him. That corporal didn't look bored no more. But he didn't let himself haul off and take a swing, neither. Just stood there, more or less at attention, and said, "Mr. Palmer, you can wait here all night and wait here all day tomorrow, and you ain't going to get in to see His Excellency the Governor. And you just sitting here waiting all day is proof you're just too plain dumb to catch on to how things are."

So it was Hooch lost his temper and took a swing. Well, not a swing exactly. More like a kick, cause Hooch never did learn no rules about fighting like a gentleman. His idea of a duel was to wait behind a rock for his enemy to pass by, shoot him in the back, and run like hell. So that corporal got Hooch's big old boot in his knee, which bent his leg backward in a way it wasn't meant to go. That corporal screamed bloody murder, which he had a right to, and not just from the pain—after a kick like that, his leg would never be any good again. Hooch probably shouldn've kicked him there, he knew, but that boy was so snooty. Practically begged for it.

Trouble was, the corporal wasn't exactly alone. First yelp he made, all of a sudden there was a sergeant and four soldiers, bayonets at the ready, popping right out of the governor's office and looking mad as hornets. The sergeant ordered two of his boys to carry the corporal to the infirmary. The others put Hooch under arrest. But it wasn't gentlemanly like that last time, four years before. This time the butts of their muskets got bumped into Hooch's body in a few places, sort of accidentally, and Hooch had him some boot prints in various places on his clothes, can't say how they got there. He ended up locked in a jail cell—no storage room this time. They left him with his clothes and a lot of pain.

No doubt about it. Things had changed around here.

That night six other men were put in lock-up, three of them drunks,

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three for brawling. Not one was Red. Hooch listened to them talking. It's not like any of them was particularly bright, but Hooch couldn't believe that they didn't talk about beating up no Reds, or making fun with some of them or something. It was like Reds had practically disappeared from the vicinity.

Well maybe that was true. Maybe the Reds had all took off, but wasn't that what Governor Harrison hoped for? With the Reds gone, why wasn't Carthage City prosperous, full of White settlers?

The only inkling Hooch got was something one of the brawlers said. "I reckon I'm broke till tax season." The others whooped and hollered a little. "I got to say I don't mind government service, but it sure ain't steady work."

Hooch knew better than to ask them what they meant. No need to call attention to himself. He sure didn't want word getting around about how he looked all beat up the night he spent in jail. That kind of idea starts spreading and pretty soon everybody thinks he can beat a body up, and Hooch didn't reckon to start all over as a common street brawler, not at this age.

In the morning the soldiers came for him. Different ones, and this time they wasn't so careless with their feet and their musket butts. They just marched Hooch on out of the jail and now, finally, he got to see Bill Harrison.

But not in his office. It was in his own governor's mansion, in a cellar room. And the way they got there was peculiar. The soldiers—must have been a dozen of them—just marched along behind the house, when all of a sudden one of them dashed over, flung up the cellar door, and two others half-dragged Hooch down the steps. Cellar door slammed shut almost before their heads were clear of it, and in all that time the soldiers just kept right on marching, as if nothing was happening. Hooch didn't like that at all. It meant that Harrison didn't want anybody to see that Hooch was with him. Which meant this meeting could get pretty ugly, cause Harrison could deny it ever happened. Oh, the *soldiers* knew, of course, but they all knew about a certain corporal who got his knee bent the wrong way last night; they weren't about to testify on Hooch Palmer's behalf.

Harrison was his old self, though, smiling and shaking Hooch by the hand and clapping him on the shoulder. "How are you, Hooch?"

"I been better, Gov. How's your wife? And that little boy of yours?"

"She's healthy as you could hope for, a refined lady like her being out here on the frontier. And my little boy, he's quite a soldier, we even stitched him up a little uniform, you should see him strutting on parade."

"It's talk like that makes me think I ought to take a wife someday."

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"I heartily recommend it. Oh, here, Hooch, what am I thinking of? You set down, set down right there."

Hooch sat. "Thanks, Bill."

Harrison nodded, satisfied. "It's good to see you, it's been so long."

"Wisht I'd've seen you yesterday," said Hooch.

Harrison smiled ruefully. "Well, I get busy. Didn't my boys tell you I had a full up schedule?"

"Schedule never used to be full for *me*, Bill."

"You know how it gets sometimes. Real busy, and what can I do about it?"

Hooch shook his head. "Now, Bill, we've lied to each other just about long enough, I think. What happened was part of a plan, and it wasn't *my* plan."

"What are you talking about, Hooch?"

"I'm saying maybe that corporal didn't want his leg broke, but I have a feeling his job was to get me swinging at him."

"His job was to see that nobody disturbed me unless they were on my schedule, Hooch. That's the only plan I know about." Harrison looked sad. "Hooch, I got to tell you, this is real ugly. Assaulting an officer of the U.S. Army."

"A corporal ain't no officer, Bill."

"I only wish I could ship you back to Suskwahenny for trial, Hooch. They got lawyers there, and juries, and so on. But the trial has to be *here*, and juries around here ain't too partial to folks who go around breaking corporals' knees."

"Suppose you stop the threats and tell me what you really want?"

"Want? I ain't asking for favors, Hooch. Just concerned about a friend of mine who's got himself in trouble with the law."

"It must be something real sickening or you'd bribe me to do it instead of trying to strong-arm me. It must be something that you think I wouldn't be willing to do unless you scare me to death, and I keep trying to imagine what *you* think is so bad that you think I wouldn't do it. It ain't much of a list, Bill."

Harrison shook his head. "Hooch, you got me wrong. Just plain wrong."

"This town is dying, Bill," said Hooch. "Things ain't working out like you planned. And I think it's cause you done some real dumb things. I think the Reds started going away—or maybe they all died off—and you made the stupid mistake of trying to make up for all that lost likker income by bringing in the scum of the earth, the worst kind of White man, the river rats who spent the night in jail with me. You've used them to collect taxes, right? Farmers don't like taxes. They specially don't like taxes when they're collected by scum like this."

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Harrison poured himself three fingers of whisky in a tumbler and drank off half of it in a single gulp.

"So you been losing your whisky-Reds, and you been losing your White farmers, and all you got left is your soldiers, the river rats, and whatever money you can steal from the United States Army appropriation for peace-keeping in the west."

Harrison drank the rest of the whisky and belched.

"What that means is you've been unlucky and you've been stupid, and somehow you think you can make me get you out of it."

Harrison poured another three fingers into the glass. But instead of drinking it, he hauled off and threw it into Hooch's face. The whisky splashed him in the eyes, the tumbler bounced off his forehead, and Hooch found himself rolling on the floor trying to dig the alcohol out of his eyes.

A while later, with a wet cloth pressed against his forehead, Hooch was sitting in the chair again, acting a lot more meek and reasonable. But that was because he knew Harrison had a flush and his own hand was just two pair. Get out of here alive and then just see what comes next, right?

"I wasn't stupid," Harrison said.

No, you're the smartest governor Carthage ever had, I'm surprised you ain't king. That's what Hooch *would've* said. But he was keeping his mouth shut.

"It was that Prophet. That Red up north. Building his Prophetstown right across the Wobbish from Vigor Church—you can't tell me that's just a coincidence. It's Armor-of-God, that's what it is, trying to take the state of Wobbish away from me. Using a *Red* to do it, too. I knew that a lot of Reds were going north, everybody knew that, but I still had me my whisky-Reds, them as hadn't died off. And with fewer Reds around here—especially the Shaw-Nee, when they left—well, I thought I'd get more White settlers. And you're wrong about my tax collectors. They didn't run the White settlers off. It was Ta-Kumsaw."

"I thought it was the Prophet."

"Don't get smart with me, Hooch, I don't have much patience these days."

Why didn't you warn me before you threw the glass? No, no, don't say nothing to make him mad. "Sorry, Bill."

"Ta-Kumsaw's been real smart. He doesn't kill White folks. He just shows up at their farms with fifty Shaw-Nee. Doesn't shoot anybody, but when you got fifty painted up warriors all around your house, these White folks didn't exactly figure it was smart to start shooting. So the White farmers watched while the Shaw-Nee opened every gate, every stable, every coop. Let them animals go on out. Horses, pigs, milk cows.

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And just like the pied piper, the animals just follow the Shaw-Nee on into the woods. Just like that. Never see them again."

"You can't tell me they never round up at least some of their stock."

"All gone. Never find even their tracks. Just vanish. That's what run the White farmers off, is knowing that any day, all their animals will just disappear."

"Shaw-Nee eating them or something?"

"How should I know? White folks come to me, they say, Get our animals back. But my soldiers, my scouts, nobody can find where Ta-Kumsaw's people are. No villages at all! I tried raiding a Caska-Skeeaw village up the Little My-Ammy, but all that did was convince more Reds to leave, didn't even slow down what Ta-Kumsaw was doing."

Hooch could imagine what that raid on the Caska-Skeeaw village was like. Old men, women, children, their corpses shot up and half burnt—Hooch knew how Harrison dealt with Reds.

"And then last month, here comes the Prophet. I knew he was coming—even the whisky-Reds couldn't talk about nothing else. Prophet's coming. Got to go see the Prophet. Well, I tried to find out where he was going to be, where he was going to give a speech, I even had some of my tame Reds try to find out for me, but no dice, Hooch. Not a clue. Nobody knew. Just one day the word went through the whole town, Prophet's here. Where? Just come on, Prophet's here. No one ever said where. I swear these Reds can talk without talking, if you know what I mean."

"Bill, tell me you had spies there, or I'll start to thinking you lost your touch."

"Spies? I went myself, how's that? And do you know how? Ta-Kumsaw sent me an invitation, if that don't beat all. No soldiers, no guns, just me."

"And you *went*? He could've captured you and—"

"He gave me his word. Ta-Kumsaw may be a Red, but he keeps his word."

Hooch thought that was kind of funny. Harrison, the man who prided himself on never keeping a promise to a Red man, but he still counted on Ta-Kumsaw keeping a promise to him. Well, he got back alive, didn't he? So Ta-Kumsaw was as good as his word.

"I went there. Must've been every Red in the whole My-Ammy country there. Must've been ten thousand. Squatting around in this old abandoned cornfield—there's plenty of them in these parts, you can bet, thanks to Ta-Kumsaw. If I'd had my two cannon there and a hundred soldiers, I could've ended the whole Red problem, then and there."

"Too bad you didn't," said Hooch.

"Ta-Kumsaw wanted me to sit right up front, but I wouldn't. I hung

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back and I listened. The Prophet got up, stood on an old stump in the field, and he talked and talked and talked."

"You understand any of it? I mean, you don't talk Shaw-Nee."

"He was talking English, Hooch. Too many different tribes there, the only language they all knew was English. Oh, sometimes he talked in that Red gibberish, but there was plenty of English. Talking about the destiny of the Red man. Stay pure from White contamination. Live all together and fill up a part of the land so the White man will have his place and the Red man will have *his*. Build a city—a crystal city, he said, it sounded real pretty except these Reds can't even build a proper shed, I hate to think how they'd do at building a city out of glass! But most of all, he said, Don't drink likker. Not a drop. Give it up, stay away from it. Likker is the chain of the White man, the chain and the whip, the chain and the whip and the knife. First he'll catch you, then he'll whip you, then he'll kill you, likker will, and when the White man's killed you with his whisky, he'll come in and steal your land, destroy it, make it unfit, dead, useless."

"Sounds like he made a real impression on you, Bill," said Hooch. "Sounds like you memorized the speech he gave."

"Memorized? He talked for three straight hours. Talked about visions of the past, visions of the future. Talked about—oh, Hooch, it was *crazy* stuff, but those Reds were drinking it up like, like—"

"Whisky."

"Like whisky except it was *instead* of whisky. They all went with him. Pretty near all of them, anyway. Only ones left are a few whisky-Reds that're bound to die soon. And of course my tame Reds, but that's different. And some wild Reds across the Hio."

"Went with him where?"

"Prophetstown! That's what kills me, Hooch. They all go up to Prophetstown, or thereabouts, right across the river from Vigor Church. And that's exactly where all the Whites are going! Well, not all to Vigor Church, but up into the lands where Armor-of-Hell Weaver has his maps. They're in cahoots, Hooch, I promise you that. Ta-Kumsaw, Armor-of-God Weaver, and the Prophet."

"Sounds like."

"The worst thing is I had that Prophet here in my own office must be a thousand times, I could have killed that boy and saved myself more trouble—but you never know, do you?"

"You know this Prophet?"

"You mean you *don't* know who it is?"

"I don't know that many Reds by name, Bill."

"How about if I tell you that he's only got one eye?"

"You ain't saying it's Lolla-Wossiky!"

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"Reckon so."

"That one-eyed drunk?"

"God's own truth, Hooch. Calls himself Tenskwa-Tawa now. It means 'the open door' or something. I'd like to shut that door. I *should've* killed him when I had the chance. But I figured when he ran off—he ran off, you know, stole a keg and took off into the woods—"

"I was here that night, I helped chase him."

"Well when he didn't come back, I figured he probably drank himself to death off that keg. But there he is telling Reds how he used to have to drink all the time, but God sent him visions and he's never had another drink."

"Send me visions, I'd give up drinking, too."

Harrison took another swallow of whisky. From the jug, this time, since the tumbler was on the floor in the corner of the room. "You see my problem, Hooch."

"I see you got lots of problems, Bill, and I don't know how any of them has a thing to do with me, except you weren't joking when you had the quartermaster tell me you only wanted four barrels."

"Oh, it's got more to do with you than that, count on it, Hooch. More than that. Because I ain't beat. The Prophet's took away all my whisky-Reds, and Ta-Kumsaw's got my White citizens scared, but I ain't quitting."

"No, you're no quitter," said Hooch. You're a slimy sneaky snake of a man, but you're no quitter. Didn't *say* that, of course, cause Harrison was bound to take it wrong—but to Hooch, it was all praise. His kind of man.

"It's Ta-Kumsaw and the Prophet, simple as that. I got to kill them. No, no, I take it back. I got to *beat* them and kill them. I got to take them on and make them both look like fools and *then* kill them."

"Good idea. I'll handle the betting on it."

"I bet you would. Stand there taking bets. Well, I can't just take my soldiers up north to Vigor Church and wipe out Prophetstown, cause Armor-of-God would fight me every step of the way, probably get the army detachment at Fort Wayne to back him up. Probably get my commission stripped or something. So I've got to arrange things so the people in Vigor Church, all along the Wobbish, they all beg me to come up and get rid of them Reds."

Now, at last, Hooch understood what this was all about. "You want a provocation."

"That's my boy, Hooch. That's my boy. I want some Reds to go up north and make some real trouble, and *tell* everybody that Ta-Kumsaw and the Prophet told them to do it. Blame it all on them."

Hooch nodded. "I see. It couldn't be just running off their cows or

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nothing like that. No, the only thing that'll get those people up north screaming for Red blood is something real ugly. Like capturing children and torturing them to death and then signing Ta-Kumsaw's name on them and leaving them where they'll be found. Something like that."

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to tell anybody to do something awful like *that*, Hooch. In fact I don't reckon I'd give them specific instructions at all. Just tell them to do something that'd rile up the Whites up north, and then spread the word that Ta-Kumsaw ordered it."

"But you wouldn't be surprised if it turned out to be rape and torture."

"I wouldn't want them to touch any white women, Hooch. That's out of line."

"Oh, that's right, pure truth," said Hooch. "So it's definitely torturing children. *Boy* children."

"Like I said, I wouldn't ever tell somebody to do a thing like that."

Hooch nodded a little, his eyes closed. Harrison might not tell somebody to do it, but he sure wasn't telling him not to do it, either. "And of course it couldn't be any Reds from around here, could it, Bill, cause they're all gone, and your tame Reds are the most worthless scum that ever lived on the face of the earth."

"Pretty much, that's true."

"So you need Reds from south of the river. Reds who still haven't heard the Prophet's preaching, so they still want likker. Reds who still have brains enough to do the job right. Reds who have the blood thirst to kill children real slow. And you need my cargo as a bribe."

"Reckon so, Hooch."

"You got it, Bill. Dismiss charges against me, and you got all my likker free. Just give me enough money to pay off my poleboys so they don't knife me on the way home, I hope that ain't too much to ask."

"Now, Hooch, you know that ain't all I need."

"But Bill, that's all I'll do."

"I can't be the one to go ask them, Hooch. I can't be the one to go tell them Cree-Eks or Choc-Taws what I need done. It's got to be somebody else, somebody who if it gets found out I can say, I never told him to do that. He used his own whisky to do it, I didn't have any idea."

"Bill, I understand you, but you guessed right from the start. You actually found something so low that I won't be part of it."

Harrison glowered at him. "Assaulting an officer is a hanging offense in this fort, Hooch. Didn't I make that clear?"

"Bill, I've lied, cheated, and sometimes killed to get ahead in the world. But one thing I've never done is bribe somebody to go steal some mother's children and torture them to death. I honestly never did that, and I honestly never will."

Harrison studied Hooch's face and saw that it was true. "Well, don't

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that beat all. There's actually a sin so bad that Hooch Palmer won't do it, even if he dies because of it."

"You won't kill me, Bill."

"Oh yes I will, Hooch. There's two reasons I will. First, you gave me the wrong answer to my request. And second, you heard my request in the first place. You're a dead man, Hooch."

"Fine with me," said Hooch. "Make it a real scratchy rope, too. A good and tall gallows, with a twenty-foot drop. I want a hanging that folks'll remember for a long time."

"You'll get a tree limb and we'll raise the rope up slow, so you strangle instead of breaking your neck."

"Just so it's memorable," said Hooch.

Harrison called in some soldiers and had them take Hooch back to jail. This time they did a little kicking and poking again, so Hooch had a whole new batch of bruises, and maybe a broken rib.

He also didn't have much time.

So he lay down real calm on the floor of the jail. The drunks were gone, but the three brawlers were still there, using all the cots; the floor was all that was available. Hooch didn't much care. He knew Harrison would give him an hour or two to think about it, then take him out and put the rope around his neck and kill him. He might pretend to give him one last chance, of course, but he wouldn't mean it, because now he wouldn't trust Hooch. Hooch had told him no, and so he'd never trust him to carry out the assignment if he let him go.

Well, Hooch planned to use the time wisely. He started out pretty simply. He closed his eyes and let some heat build up inside him. A spark. And then he sent that spark outside himself. It was like what doodlebugs said they did, sending out their bug to go searching underground and see what it could see. He set his spark to searching and pretty soon he found what he was looking for. Governor Bill's own house. His spark was too far away by now for him to find some particular spot in the house. And his aim couldn't be too tight. So instead he just pumped all his hate and rage and pain into the spark, built it hotter and hotter and hotter. He let himself go like he never done before in his life. And he kept pushing it and pushing it until he started hearing that most welcome sound.

"Fire! Fire!" The shouts came from outside, from far away, but more and more people took up the cry. Gunshots went off—distress signals.

The three brawlers heard it, too. One of them stepped on Hooch where he was lying on the floor, they were in such a hurry. Stood at the door, they did, rattling and shouting at the guard. "Let us out! Don't go trying to fight that fire without letting us out first! Don't let us die in here!"

Hooch hardly noticed the man stepping on him, he already hurt so

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bad. Instead he just lay there, using his spark again, only this time heating up the metal inside the lock of the jail door. Now his aim was tight and his spark could get much hotter.

The guard came in and put his key in the lock, turned it, opened the door. "You boys can come on out," he said. "Sergeant said so, we need you to help with the fire brigade."

Hooch struggled to his feet, but the guard straight-armed him and shoved him back into the cell. Hooch wasn't surprised. But he made the spark go hotter yet, so hot that now the iron of the lock melted inside. It even glowed red a little. The guard slammed the door shut and went to turn the key. By now it was so hot that it burned his hand. He cussed and went for his shirttail to try and grab the key, but Hooch kicked the door open, knocking the guard down. He stomped the guard in the face and kicked his head, which probably broke his neck, but Hooch didn't think of that as murder. He thought of it as justice, cause the guard had been all set to leave him locked in his cell to burn to death.

Hooch walked on out of the jail. Nobody paid him much attention. He couldn't see the mansion from here, but he could see the smoke rising. Sky was low and grey. Probably it'd rain before it burned the stockade. Hooch sure hoped not, though. Hoped the whole place burned to the ground. It was one thing to want to kill off Reds, that was fine with Hooch, he and Harrison saw eye to eye on that. Kill them with likker if you can, bullets if you can't. But you don't go killing White folks, you don't go hiring Reds to torture White babies. Maybe to Harrison it was all part of the same thing. Maybe to him it was like White soldiers having to die in a war with Reds, only the soldiers'd just be a little younger. All in a good cause, right? Maybe Harrison could think that way, but Hooch couldn't. It actually took him by surprise, to tell the truth. He was more like Andrew Jackson than he ever supposed. He had a line he wouldn't cross. He drew it in a different place than old Hickory did, but still, he had a line, and he'd die before he crossed it.

Of course he didn't reckon to die if he could help it. He couldn't go out the stockade gate, cause the bucket line to the river would go through there and he'd be seen. But it was easy enough to climb up to the parapet. The soldiers weren't exactly keeping a lookout. He clambered over the wall and dropped down outside the fort. Nobody saw him. He walked the ten yards into the woods, then made his way—slowly, cause his ribs hurt pretty bad and he was a little weak from so much sparking, it took something out of him—through the woods to the riverbank.

He came out of the woods on the far side of the open area around the wharf. There was his flatboat, still loaded up with all his kegs. And his poleboys standing around, watching the bucket brigade dipping into the river some thirty yards farther upstream. It didn't surprise Hooch a bit

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that his poleboys weren't over there helping with the buckets. They weren't exactly the public-spirited type.

Hooch walked out onto the wharf, beckoning for the poleboys to come join him. He jumped down to the flatboat; stumbled a little, from being weak and hurting. He turned around to tell his boys what was happening, why they had to push off, but they hadn't followed. They just stood there on the bank, looking at him. He beckoned again, but they didn't make a move to come.

Well, then, he'd go without them. He was even moving toward the rope, to cast off and pole himself away, when he realized that not all the poleboys were on shore. No, there was one missing. And he knew right where that missing boy would be. Right there on the flatboat, standing right behind him, reaching out his hands—

Mike Fink wasn't the knifing kind. Oh, he'd knife you if he had to, but he'd rather kill with his bare hands. He used to say something about killing with a knife, some comparison with whores and a broomstick. Anyway, that's why Hooch knew that it wouldn't be a knife. That it wouldn't be quick. Harrison must've known Hooch might get away, so he bought off Mike Fink, and now Fink would kill him sure.

Sure, but slow. And slow gave Hooch time. Time to make sure he didn't die alone.

So as the fingers closed around his throat and cinched tight, much tighter than Hooch ever imagined, clamping him so he thought his head would get wrung right off, he forced himself to make his spark go, to find that keg, that one place, he knew right where the place was on the flatboat, to hot up that keg, as hot as he could, hotter, hotter—

And he waited for the explosion, waited and waited, but it never came. It felt like Fink's fingers had pressed through the front of his throat clear to the spine, and he felt all his muscles just give way, he felt himself kicking, his lungs heaving to try to suck in air that just wouldn't come, but he kept his spark going till the last second, waiting for the gunpowder keg to blow.

Then he died.

Mike Fink hung on to him for another whole minute after he was dead, maybe just cause he liked the feel of a dead man dangling from his hands. Hard to tell with Mike Fink. Some folks said he was as nice a man as you could hope to find, when he was in the mood. Sure that's what Mike thought of himself. He *liked* to be nice and have friends and drink real sociable. But when it came to killing, well, he liked that too.

But you can't just hang onto a dead body forever. For one thing, somebody's going to start complaining about it or maybe puking. So he shoved Hooch's body off into the water.

"Smoke," said one of the poleboys, pointing.

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Sure enough, there was smoke coming out of the middle of the pile of kegs.

"It's the gunpowder keg!" shouted one of them.

Well, the poleboys took off running to get away from the explosion, but Mike Fink just laughed and laughed. He walked over and started unloading kegs, hoisting them onto the wharf, unloading them until he got to the middle where there was a keg with a fuse coming out of it. He didn't pick *that* one up with his hands, though. He tipped it over with his heel, then kind of rolled it along till it was on the open area around the edge of the boat.

By now the poleboys had come back to see what was going on, since it looked pretty much like Mike Fink wasn't going to blow up after all. "Hatchet," Mike called out, and one of the boys tossed him the one he kept in a sheath at his belt. It took a few good whacks, but the top finally sprung off the keg, and a whole cloud of steam came up. The water inside was so hot it was still boiling.

"You mean it wasn't gunpowder after all?" asked one of the boys. Not a bright one, but then not many rivermen was famous for brains.

"Oh, it was gunpowder when he set it down here," said Mike. "Back in Suskwahenny. But you don't think Mike Fink'd go all the way down the Hio River on the same flatboat with a keg of powder with a fuse coming out of it, do you?"

Then Mike jumped off the boat up onto the wharf and bellowed at the top of his voice, so loud that they heard him clear inside the fort, so loud that the bucket brigade stopped long enough to listen.

"My name is Mike Fink, boys, and I'm the meanest low-down son of an alligator that ever bit off the head of a buffalo! I eat growed men's ears for breakfast and bears' ears for supper, and when I'm thirsty I can drink enough to stop Niagara from falling. When I piss folks get on flatboats and float downstream for fifty mile, and when I fart the Frenchmen catch the air in bottles and sell it for perfume. I'm Mike Fink, and this is my flatboat, and if you miserable little pukes ever put that fire out, there's a free pint of whisky in it for every one of you!"

Then Mike Fink led the poleboys over and joined the bucket brigade, and they slowed the fire down until the rain came and put it out.

That night, with all the soldiers drinking and singing, Mike Fink was sitting up sober as you please, feeling pretty good about finally being in the likker business for himself. Only one of the poleboys was with him now, the youngest fellow, who kind of looked up to Fink. The boy was setting there playing with the fuse that used to go into a gunpowder keg.

"This fuse wasn't lit," said the poleboy.

"No, I reckon not," said Mike Fink.

"Well, how'd the water get to boiling then?"

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"Reckon Hooch had a few tricks up his sleeve. Reckon Hooch had something to do with the fire in the fort."

"You knew that, didn't you?"

Fink shook his head. "Nope, just lucky. I'm just plain lucky. I just get a feeling about things, like I had a feeling about that gunpowder keg, and I just do what I feel like doing."

"You mean like a knack?"

In answer, Fink stood up and pulled down his trousers. There on his left buttock was a sprawl of a tattoo, six-sided and dangerous looking. "My Mama had that poked on when I wasn't a month old. Said that'd keep me safe so I'd live out my whole natural life." He turned and showed the boy the other buttock. "And that one she said was to help me make my fortune. I didn't know how it'd work, and she died without telling me, but as near as I can tell it makes me lucky. Makes it so I just kind of know what I ought to do." He grinned. "Got me a flatboat now, and a cargo of whisky, don't I?"

"Is the governor really going to give you a medal for killing Hooch?"

"Well, for catching him, anyhow, looks like."

"I don't guess the Gov looked too bothered that old Hooch was dead, though."

"Nope," said Fink. "No, I reckon not. No, me and the Gov, we're good friends now. He says he's got some things need doing, that only a man like me can do."

The poleboy looked at him with adoration in his eighteen-year-old eyes. "Can I help you? Can I come with you?"

"You ever been in a fight?"

"A lot of fights!"

"You ever bit off an ear?"

"No, but I gouged out a man's eye once."

"Eyes are easy. Eyes are soft."

"And I butted a man's head so he lost five teeth."

Fink considered that for a few seconds. Then he grinned and nodded. "Sure, you come along with me, boy. By the time I'm through, there ain't a man, woman, or child within a hundred mile of this river who won't know my name. Do you doubt that, boy?"

The boy didn't doubt it.

In the morning, Mike Fink and his crew pushed off for the south bank of the Hio, loaded with a wagon, some mules, and eight kegs of whisky. Bound to do a little trading with the Reds.

In the afternoon, Governor William Harrison buried the charred remains of his second wife and their little boy, who had the misfortune of being in the nursery together, dressing the boy in his little parade uniform, when the room burst into flames.

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A fire in his own house, set by no hand, which cut off what he loved the most, and no power on earth could bring them back.

Ta-Kumsaw returned from trying to persuade the Choc-Taw to join his army of Red men, and visited his brother the Prophet. They met in Prophetstown, where the Tippy-Canoe joined the Wobbish, across the river from the White man's town of Vigor Church.

"I did all I needed to, and less than I hoped for," said Ta-Kumsaw. "Soon my army will be ready, and the White man will be driven out."

The one-eyed Prophet only smiled. "Do what you want with your army, Ta-Kumsaw, face of the land, voice of the land. I already did what you couldn't do."

"What?" asked the greatest of Red warriors. "What could you do, that I couldn't do?"

"I made White Murderer Harrison pay for our father with the death of his wife and his son."

Ta-Kumsaw cried out in grief. "His wife and his son?"

"I guided the spark of whisky-man Hooch."

"Fool!" cried Ta-Kumsaw. "He killed a father, a very bad thing. But you killed a son, and all future sons and daughters in his wife's belly. He cut off your root, but you killed all his seed. Before you did this, the White man was in debt to the land, and the land was on our side. I was the face of the land, the voice of the land! I could have called down tornadoes and floods. I could have shaken the earth! But now you made the White man pay that debt. I'll have no more strength than my own arm, and the arms of my warriors."

The Prophet closed his good eye. A tear came from it. And a tear also came from the slack lid of the other eye.

"I wish you had stayed a whisky-Red, Lolla-Wossiky," said Ta-Kumsaw.

Within a year, Prophetstown was destroyed by Governor Harrison's cannon, and the Prophet crossed the Mizzipy with the remnant of his followers. Ta-Kumsaw, betrayed by the French, was defeated by Old Hickory's White army in the Battle of Fort Detroit. Many saw him staggering under the weight of a dozen bitter wounds, but his body was never found. Some say that he was swallowed up in the earth, where the land is healing him, waiting to bring him back to lead a new Red army to take back the land. ●

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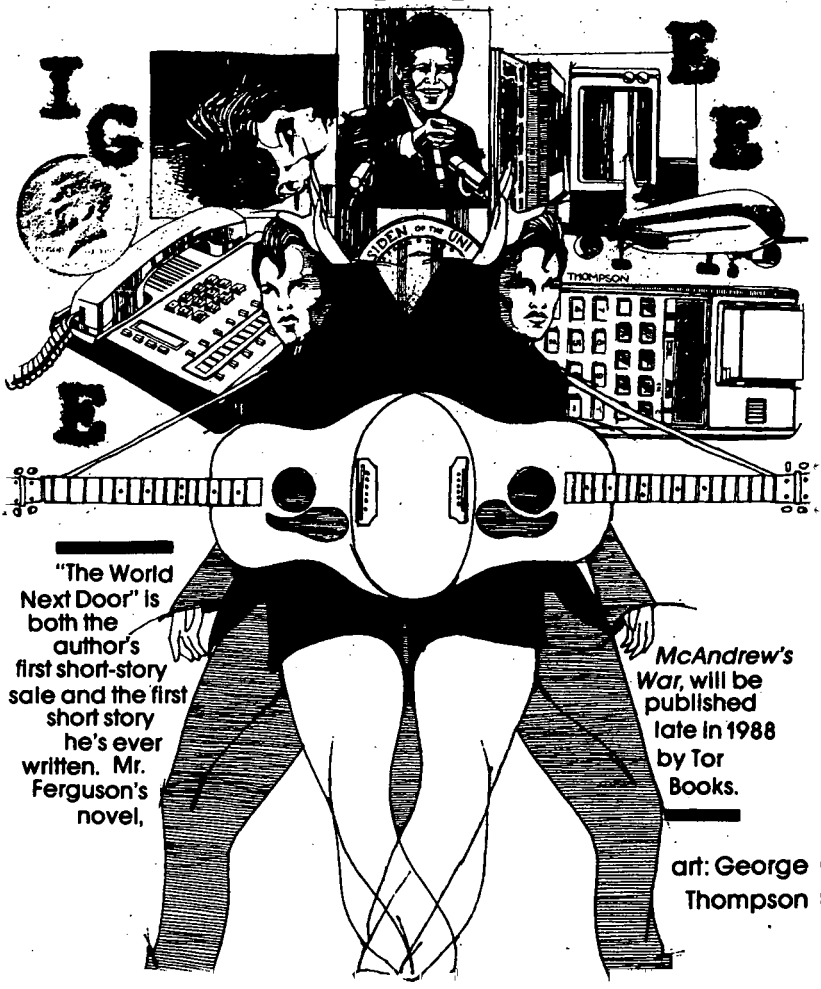
by Brad Ferguson

THE WORLD NEXT DOOR



"The World Next Door" is both the author's first short-story sale and the first short story he's ever written. Mr. Ferguson's novel, *McAndrew's War*, will be published late in 1988 by Tor Books.

art: George Thompson

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September 15

Jess told me today his sugar beet crop seems to be doing pretty well. Time was when nobody could get anything at all to grow, much less something as tricky as sugar beets, so Jess deserves a lot of credit . . . and it'll be awful nice to have real table sugar again, the white, grainy stuff you could buy at the store. (What was it called? Dominoes? Something like that.) We're all sick of maple sugar, and the women say you can't cook with it, except for ham—and we don't have any pigs around here anymore. It surprised me a little last spring, when the town decided it wanted real sugar so bad, it allowed Jess to turn two acres over to it. Jess raises some of the best corn in the county, and we need all we can get—the eating kind and the drinking kind, both. But sugar is calories, too.

More dreams last night, the crazy kind a lot of people around here have been having. Didn't sleep all that well myself. Doc says it's more wish-fulfillment stuff than anything else, like right after the war. I don't know; these seem different. I remember them better, for one thing. I hardly ever remember dreams at all; now I can remember whole bits of them—colors and smells, too. In fact, in last night's dream I was watching color television, but I forget what was on.

September 18

A singer named Wanderin' Jake came through today; he's from the Albany area. I wrote his news on the chalkboard at Town Hall, and the mayor's wife fed him well. The news: There were floods in Glens Falls last month, eleven people dead; there's a new provisional state government in Rensselaer (that makes four that I know of, if that preacher in Buffalo hasn't been assassinated yet); the governor in Rensselaer wants to send a state delegation to next year's American Jubilee at Mount Thunder; and there's been no word from an expedition that set out six months ago from Schenectady, bound for the atomic power plant at Indian Point to see if it can be made useful again. The party is presumed dead.

Wanderin' Jake led a sing-along in the square just after sunset tonight, and we had a good time, even though there wasn't much on hand to picnic with and won't be until we get the crops in. With this climate, we can't harvest until maybe late October, and only then if we're lucky and there's been no rain from the south.

Today I remembered that it was Domino sugar, singular. There was a jingle about how grandmothers and mothers know the best sugar is Domino, which is how I remembered it. It's strange how those jingles come back to haunt you. Twenty-one great tobaccos make twenty wonderful Kings. Let Hertz put you in the driver's seat. I like Ike, you like Ike, everybody likes Ike. And you get a lot to like with a Marlboro.

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September 25

The town got together tonight to discuss what, if anything, we're going to do about the American Jubilee. No decision, of course—we've only talked it over once—but the thrust of tonight's meeting was, the hell with Rensselaer and the governor there, just like we said the hell with the governors in Buffalo, Syracuse, and Watertown. What if Rensselaer decides to tax us? We don't have the crops to spare for taxes, and our town has been doing a good job of hiding away nice and quiet in these mountains.

I also asked if we were going to be doing something about getting me a new typewriter ribbon. The mayor says he wants typed minutes—he says they mean we're still civilized and a going concern, and he's not wrong about that—but I've been reinking this same damn ribbon for more than ten years, and it's got big holes in it, especially at the ends where the keys hammer away before the typewriter catches its breath and reverses the ribbon. I'm also running out of ink. I said I'd be willing to go with some people into a big town like Tupper Lake to see if there's a few ribbons left in the stores there, but the mayor said he can't spare the people; there's bandits all over the place and it would be dangerous to go into a big, empty town like Tupper. He said maybe somebody could make a new ribbon for me. I said fine, but where are you going to get a *long* piece of cotton that's not falling apart? If I'm going to be town scribe, I told him, I have got to have something to scribe with.

At least we don't have to try and make paper, which I think would be impossible. The old school's still got a lot of paper in it. The Hygiene Committee's been doing a good job of keeping the building free of vermin, so the paper should last. If I don't have a newspaper anymore, at least I have this journal and the Town Hall chalkboard, so I'm still a newspaperman.

September 30

Another meeting on that Jubilee. Half the town now seems to want to do something—send a representative, hold a picnic, whatever. Maybe they think Camelot's going to come back. The other half agrees (with me) that the Jubilee is just an excuse to blow the President's horn for him, and that if it hadn't been for the war, the President would have been out of office in '68, maybe even '64. Giving him a toot for still being in office is an unnecessary reminder of the war, and maybe even a reward for having half-caused it.

I wonder who the ass-kisser was that came up with the idea for the Jubilee? Some general in charge of public relations? At least we know it wasn't a congressman. If we've lost a lot, we at least got rid of the goddamn congressmen.

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October 2

Jess, the fool, went out in a pouring rain today to check on his beet crop. The poor idiot. At least the winds were from the northwest, up Montreal way. It's pretty clean up there; maybe Jess is okay, but we've got no way to check. Jess' wife is frantic. I don't blame her. I also wonder if we've lost that beet crop, not to mention his corn and everyone else's crops, too. Damn, damn, damn.

October 5

Funny thing happened. I was talking to Dick LeClerc this morning, just passing the time at his trading post. Dick mentioned he hasn't been sleeping well lately. He says he had a dream last night in which he's in his store, but it's not the trading post. It's bigger and cleaner, for one thing, and there are electric lights and freezers and shopping carts, like in those city supermarkets from before the war. The thing he remembers best from the dream is his cash register. It's a little white thing, he says, but it had funny numbers on it . . . green, glowing ones, made up of sharp angles. The thing hardly made any noise at all, except for some beeping whenever you hit a key—and you really didn't hit keys, but numbers on a pad that felt like a thin sponge. Dick says when he woke up, he was real disappointed that he didn't still have the cash register to play with. That's just like Dick; I've seen him fool with a rat trap for hours, trying to make it work better. He's always been one for a gadget.

October 13

Another weird dream. (I feel a little guilty about using up ribbon and ink recording all these dreams, but I think it's important.) This time I wrote down what I could of it before I forgot. Couldn't remember much, anyway. I was back at the paper and there were a lot of people around, people I'd known for years (but haven't ever met, waking). There was all kinds of stuff around the office. Electric lights (no, *fluorescent* lights; they were different) and a few desks had typewriters better than this one, but most of the desks had little TVs on them—except the TVs didn't show pictures, but words . . . hundreds of little green words on a dead black screen. Maybe Dick LeClerc planted this in my head with his tale of the cash register with the little green numbers on it. Crazy how your mind works.

Jess is still okay, his wife says. His gums look good, and bleeding's one of the first signs. He didn't get the shits, either, and he hasn't been particularly tired.

October 20

Another singer showed up today, and getting two in just over a month

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is really unusual, because we're so hidden away here. His name is Elvis Presley, and he came into town this afternoon with a couple of what he called "backup men"—a guy with a guitar and another guy with a small set of drums that didn't look too easy to carry through these mountains. The drummer's a Negro. We haven't seen one of those around here in maybe twenty years.

Some of the folks remember Elvis pretty well from the old days. He was a big deal back then, always being on television and making records; he even made some movies. Now he makes a living on the road, singing. He looks good . . . maybe a little thin, but we all are. Some of his hair's gone, too; whether it's from radiation or because he's, what, fifty?—I don't know. He'll do a set for us tomorrow. I think it'll help take our minds off the anniversary of the beginning of the war.

We've got Elvis and his people boarded with the mayor. Elvis says he's just happy to get in out of the weather. He also says he's got a lot of news from faraway places, which he'll tell us about just as soon as he and his group get themselves some food and rest.

October 21

Elvis did a nice set, all right. Led it with a song I remembered about loving him tender. I liked it; we all did.

I got his news at the shindig after the performance. Elvis says there's not much of the country left, as much as he's seen of it. The war caught him in Nashville, where he was making one of his records. The Russians didn't bomb Nashville, but the city was abandoned after the Fidel flu hit in '69 and most people died. Elvis caught it but recovered, and he's been on the road ever since.

Elvis says he walked most of the way here, taking his sweet time; he and his backup men only rarely find a ride. Sometimes they settle in a place for months; right now, they're going to Montpelier to see how things are there. (I told him there's been no news from that part of New England for years.)

Elvis says he no longer bothers to go near big cities. He says the cities they didn't get with the bombers have been deserted—no food supply, no law and order, and loads of disease and misery did the job. We knew New York was bombed, and Boston and Washington and Cleveland, too, but we weren't sure about Columbus, Chicago, Gary, Indianapolis, and about twenty others Elvis mentioned. All gone. Where the hell was the Air Force that October? For Christ's sake!

Elvis says he thinks the population is headed back up again, but he admits that it might just be wishful thinking on his part. Elvis also says he met the President at Mount Thunder a couple of years ago, and he looked all right—but gray and lined, not nearly the young man we re-

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member, and he's sick to boot . . . something to do with his kidneys. He never did get married again, either, although Elvis understands that the President still takes his pleasures with any of the couple of hundred women who live in the mountain's government complex, which is no less than I'd expect from a scoundrel like him.

October 22.

Today was the anniversary. We all stood up at the end of Elvis's performance and sang the Banner, him leading us along on his guitar. Most of us cried a little. The mayor made a speech, said an Our Father, and raised the anniversary flag his wife made back in '78. The flag looks odd like that, the red and blue parts replaced by black, but it's appropriate. After the Pledge, the mayor hauled the flag down for another year.

Elvis did a bunch of his old songs and also some that his drummer wrote. His drummer's really quite a songwriter. One was a happy thing called "Girls Just Want to Have Fun"—the lyrics weren't much, but the tune was good and the whole thing made us laugh, which we needed—and the other was one that made me get all teary. Elvis called it "Let It Be." That man can sing a little, all right. I asked the drummer afterwards where he'd gotten the songs. He shrugged and said he'd just dreamed 'em, woke up and wrote 'em down. He says he's been dreaming recently that he's an executive with some big record company in New York. Big office, too, with air conditioning. I remember air conditioning.

Elvis was interested that I've been keeping a journal of our times here, and I've let him read some of it. He says that while he hasn't been having any dreams at all, he's interested in ours.

October 23

Elvis gave his last performance here tonight, finishing with a song called "The World Next Door." He says he wrote it himself just this morning. It's about the world we could have had without the war. He says he was inspired to do it by all the dream entries in this journal of mine. I'm proud of that, inspiring a song and all.

I had another one of those dreams last night. I was on a big airplane—I mean a *big* one. People were seated maybe ten across. They showed movies. I was having a real liquor drink—Jack Daniel's, and I can almost taste it now—and on the little napkin that came with the drink was printed AMERICAN AIRLINES LUXURYLINER 747. I wonder where I was supposed to be going? Maybe Elvis can work the dream into his song somehow, the next time he does it somewhere.

November 1

Winter's here with a vengeance. It's warmer the year 'round than it

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used to be, but the first snow fell today. It'll melt off, but we should be doing more than we are to prepare for the winter.

Jess, who still feels good, finished hauling in his beet crop today, with the help of a bunch of kids from Mrs. Lancaster's school. We're all looking forward to the sugar.

Last night was Halloween, and the kids still do dress-up, although trick-or-treat is out of the question. Strange thing, though: One of the kids—Tommy Matthews—went around town wrapped in a charcoal-colored Navy blanket and an old Army helmet his dad's had since Korea. He also had a pair of swimming goggles and a broomstick handle he held like a sword. The costume made no damn sense, so I asked him who he was supposed to be. Darth Vader, he said. Who's that? I asked him. A bad man, Tommy said. He says he dreamed him. He breathes like this, Tommy added, noisily sucking in air and blowing it out again.

Jesus. The kids are beginning to dream, too.

November 10

More and more dreams. Everybody's beginning to talk about them now. No one understands what's going on.

We had a town meeting tonight, at which it was decided to forget about doing anything for the Jubilee. We've got our own problems.

Nobody's sleeping very well. They wake up in the middle of the night with such a profound sense of loss, there's no getting any rest. Everybody's tired and cranky.

After the Jubilee vote was taken, we suspended regular business so everyone could talk about the dreaming. I was asked to write down some of the things people remember from their dreams. Here are some of the clearest:

Men land on the moon in a black-and-white spaceship that looks like a spider. There's another kind of spaceship that looks more like an airplane. Both have American flags painted on them.

A guy named Sylvester (or maybe Stephen) Stallion is in a movie about a guy who rescues people—prisoners of war?—from a place called Vietnam. (I remember Vietnam, and so I'm putting that one down.) Also, there's a big, black monument in Washington to servicemen who died in Vietnam . . . thousands and thousands of servicemen.

Watches that show numbers to tell time.

Seat belts in cars.

Telephones with little buttons on them instead of dials. The buttons make music.

Something called Home Box Office. Something else called *People* magazine. Somebody named Princess Di.

A man named Jerry Falwell who's either a preacher or a politician.

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Young men with purple and orange hair wearing earrings in pierced ears.

Radios so small you can wear them on your head, so people can listen to them as they walk around.

A government program called Medicare, for old people.

There were others, but these are representative. Doc spoke up about wish-fulfillment fantasies again, and theorized that Elvis being here recently might have reminded us too much about the old world. He pointed out that while everyone seems to be having dreams, no two people are having exactly the same dreams about the same things. He says not to worry, that it will pass. The mayor said that while people aren't having *exactly* the same dreams, they're close enough to make him suspicious; he called it a psychic event. Doc's answer to that was that since people have been doing nothing else but talk about their dreams, the dreams they have are being influenced by those conversations.

In other business, Jess said he'd have the sugar ready in a week or two; the grinding and drying is taking him longer to do than he thought it would, but he says he doesn't need any help. We're all looking forward to the sugar. Since Jess is still okay, we're assuming the crop is. Now if we could only grow coffee . . . .

November 12

Big snow last night. Twelve inches on the ground, and this one won't melt off. But we've gotten the crops and firewood in.

The temperature's taken a plunge, too. We'd probably have lost some field hands if they'd still been working out in the open. Doc says with the winds still coming out of the northwest, the snow's safe enough, since the early October rain was. That's a relief; it means we'll have a healthy soil for next spring's planting.

November 15

The dreams got very sharp, very real last night. I saw superhighways with thousands of cars on them. I was reading a thick paperback book by somebody named Jackie Collins. My wife and daughter were still alive and with me. There was a nice little house I lived in, right in this town. There was a color TV set in the living room and another one in our bedroom; both were showing the news, but I don't remember any, except that the announcer seemed excited and worried, maybe scared. And there was a wonderful, luxurious indoor bathroom with all the hot water you could want. It was so real I could touch it. I woke up suddenly in the night and I cried for my family—gone all these years, since the first, worst days.

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November 16

No dreams last night at all. Slept well for the first time in weeks.

I tried Jess' sugar. Wonderful! I'd forgotten how good real sugar could be. I sprinkled some of my share on wild blueberries I picked a couple of days ago.

November 18

Everybody in town is saying their dreams are gone. Doc says we've all had a psychic trauma, but it's over now.

Big topic in the meeting tonight was how to ration out the meat supply. The dairymen think it's time to rebuild their milking stock; the townies say they're hungry for real, red meat, and since the rain's been good, the meat will be good, too. We'll probably compromise on this again; a lot of those bossies aren't going to make it through the winter anyway. And it snowed like hell again today.

November 19

Jess came in from his farm to say he'd found a body by the side of the road on his way in. It was a stranger, shot dead where he stood; there was dried blood under him and nowhere else. Doesn't look like a bandit attack, though; the kid still had his wallet on him. Maybe it was a hunting accident, but the mayor's posted extra patrols, just in case it was bandits after all. We'll go out and get the body tonight.

November 21

Nobody can figure it out.

The body's the damnedest thing anyone's ever seen. Doc went through the kid's ID and came up with all sorts of stuff that didn't make any sense.

First off, there was a lot of ID, and no one here has any anymore. The kid's name was John David Wright. He was just about to turn twenty. There was a New York State driver's license dated this year; the kid's picture was on it. It's a good sign things are returning to normal, if they've begun issuing those again. Only problem is, it doesn't say where the seat of government was that issued it. Was it in Rensselaer or Syracuse or what?

Wright's home town is given as this one, but he's a complete stranger to us. The address on his driver's license is for a big house on Bates Road that burned down right after the war. Jess says he thinks he remembers a family named Wright who lived there around the time the war started, but they all died in the fire.

The kid was wearing a wristwatch with numbers on it instead of hands; Fred Crawthers says it looks a lot like the watch he saw in one of his

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dreams. He had money, too—bills and change both—all with recent dates. I was pleased to see the mint is back in business . . . but there was a half-dollar coin that bore the President's picture, which I think is overdoing it. There were also a couple of credit cards called Mastercard and Visa; it took me a while to recognize a credit card when I saw one.

Wright also had a receipt, dated three days ago, from a Howard Johnson's restaurant. I remember those. They were on highways and had orange roofs. But there aren't any around here and there never were.

Young Wright was wearing eyeglasses, but they weren't made of glass. They had plastic lenses that scratch easily; Doc showed me. Doc's been through the kid and reports nothing physically unusual except for his teeth. He's got the usual fillings, but one of his front teeth was covered by a tough white plastic. Doc says it covered a bad crack and looked convincingly good. (I wish I knew where they were doing dental work these days. Everybody in town needs some.)

The only other thing Doc said was that the kid was maybe too healthy. He had good weight on him, no obvious signs of radiation impairment, no nothing. About like we all were, before the war.

Well, the kid may be one of ours; we don't know. We'll treat him right, anyway. We'll bury him tomorrow as best we can, with all this damn snow on the ground.

November 23

Doc came by the house this morning, red-eyed and sleepless. He says he didn't tell all he knew about the Wright boy, but he decided to tell me and give me the proof. I can write it down and hide the proof, as long as I don't show it to the mayor or anyone else right away. Doc's afraid people might panic or something. I think the people around here are stronger than that, but I'll respect Doc's wishes.

Anyway, I'm not sure I believe it myself, although I've got it all right here in front of me. When Doc began undressing Wright's body for autopsy, he found that the kid had wrapped himself in newspapers. It's an old Boy Scout trick, for insulation. The kid had used six sheets from the Albany *Times-Union* from the 13th of November, this year. Now there is no Albany and that area sure isn't in any shape to print newspapers . . . but this paper was fresh and white. The sheets covering the kid's chest are full of buckshot holes and covered with blood, but the rest of the sheets are okay.

We have the front page, and it's clean. The headline tells about a SOVIET ULTIMATUM. Another story says PRESIDENT URGES CIVIL DEFENSE MEASURES. A third reads POPE FLIES TO MOSCOW TO MEDIATE CRISIS. There's also what we used to call a think-piece about the number of weapons the U.S. and the Soviet Union have and the

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damage they could do. The story is a horror of thousands of intercontinental missiles that carry ten or more warheads each, and there are germ bombs and chemical bombs and orbital bombs and things that carry radioactive dust.

None of this is anything we know about, none of it. I read the ULTIMATUM story. It said the presence of missile-carrying Soviet nuclear subs off the Atlantic coast had caused the worst breach in relations between the superpowers since the Cuban missile crisis, which almost caused a war back in '62.

Almost. My dear sweet Jesus. Almost, it said.

Doc says he thinks he knows what happened. The world next door, Elvis called it, and Doc says he was right.

Doc thinks the next-door world was the one we'd be living in if there hadn't been a war about Cuba. He says it's a real place, or it was. Now Doc thinks it's gone, because the dreams stopped; Doc no longer thinks the dreams were mass hysteria or any of the other things he called them. He says the next-door world must have had an even worse war than we did, because of those weapons in the paper. He thinks everybody died, and maybe the impending death of a whole, entire planet is enough to open a door wide enough so that dreams, and even a kid, start coming through. Maybe we were on the receiving end because we're a nearly dead world . . . not quite dead, and maybe we'll pull through, despite everything. But that other world, with those fearsome weapons, must be gone, just like the dreams it sent us.

We don't know who shot John David Wright, but Doc figures it was Jess himself, startled when the kid came out of nowhere without hailing Jess first.

We could probably prove it, if it's true, but that would only get Jess hanged, and we need him and his farm. Besides, Jess was decent enough to report the body and make sure we'd bury it with proper respect. The poor kid is dead, and we can't bring him back. Let it lay.

November 28

We all got together and ate as much as we'd put aside for the feast—it turned out to be a fairly good year. All in all, it was a pretty nice Thanksgiving . . . except the kid's watch won't show any numbers anymore, and I can't make the thing work. I guess the battery or whatever must be dead. That was the best goddamn watch I ever had, even counting the old days. It's a shame it gave out so soon. ●

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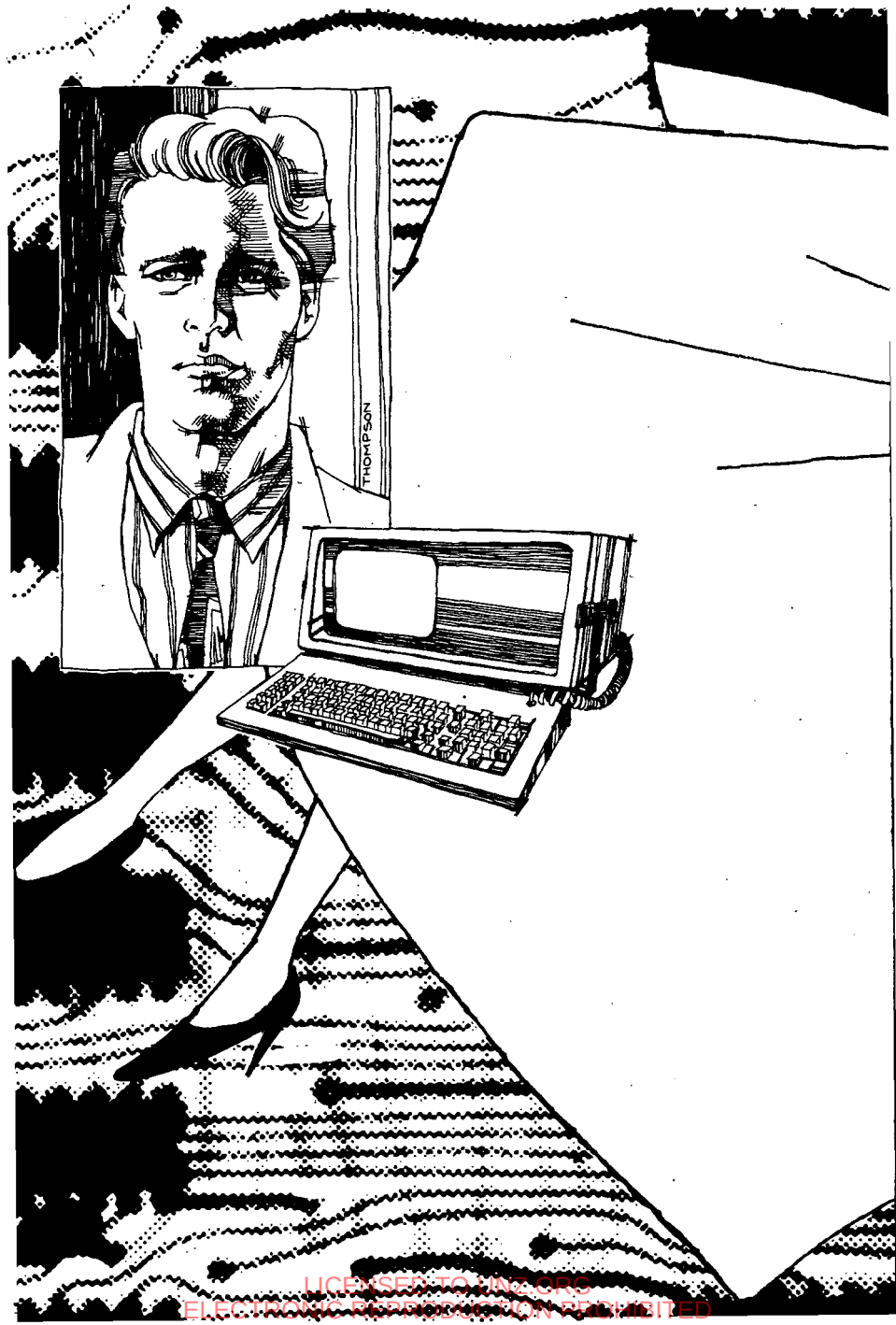

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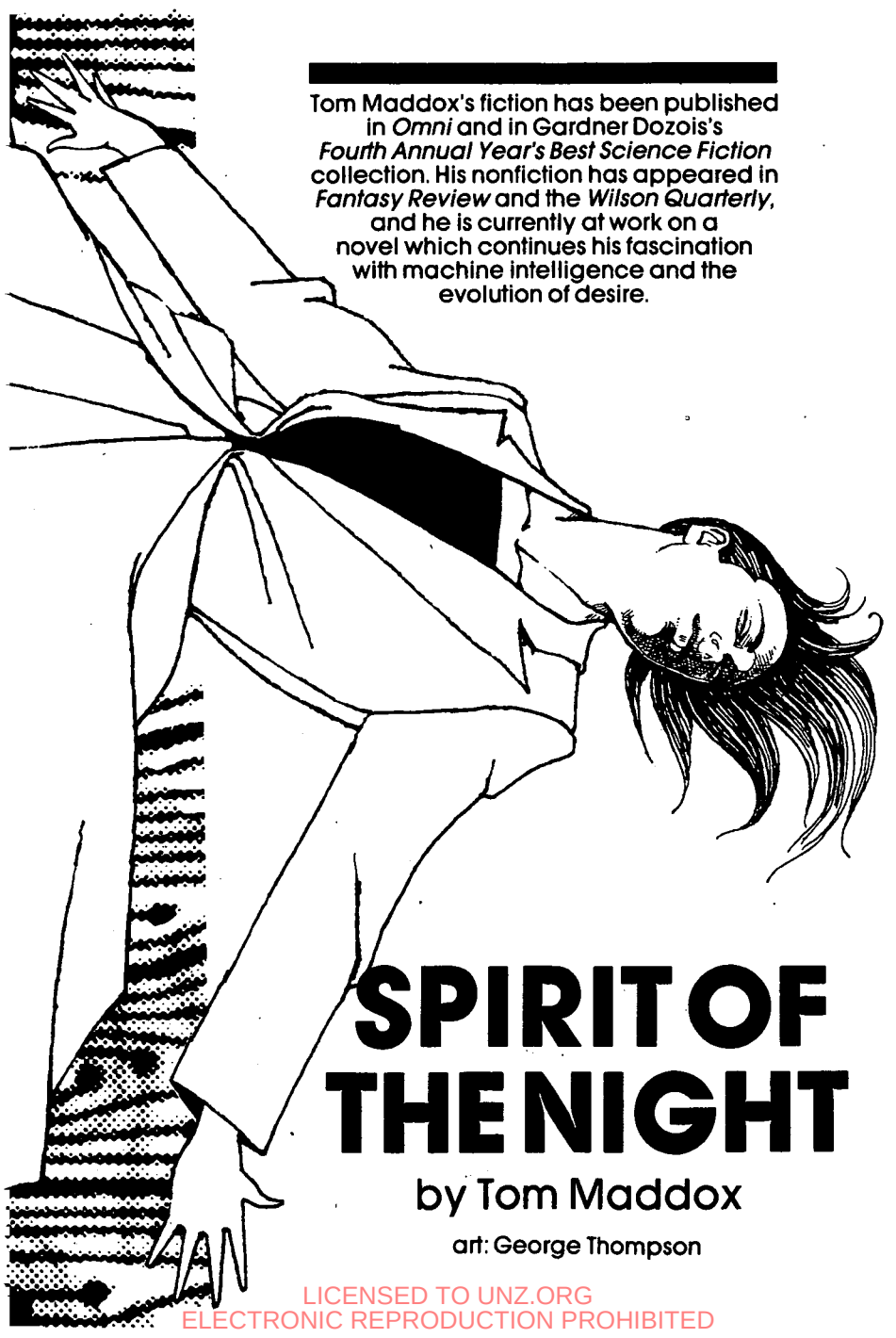

Tom Maddox's fiction has been published in *Omni* and in Gardner Dozois's *Fourth Annual Year's Best Science Fiction* collection. His nonfiction has appeared in *Fantasy Review* and the *Wilson Quarterly*, and he is currently at work on a novel which continues his fascination with machine intelligence and the evolution of desire.

SPIRIT OF THE NIGHT

by Tom Maddox

art: George Thompson

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We dropped out of bright sunshine into gray fog and rough air. Two rows in front of us a woman said that EuroWeather was forecasting a beautiful May Day for Paris. Carol squeezed my arm, hard.

"We'll be there," I said. "Tomorrow."

Carol turned to me, smiling. Harsh interior lights showed lines in her face and gray streaks in her hair, but at the age of forty and after ten years of very close quarters, she still knocked sparks off me like steel off flint. I leaned over and kissed her neck just below the line of her jaw.

The plane slewed sideways, we broke through low clouds, and green Virginia countryside showed briefly before we touched lightly onto wet tarmac.

One of the airport's mutant reptile buses wheeled out to meet us, then felt with blind stalks for the side of the plane. Five minutes later we all filed aboard, and it rolled us through a gray gothic dream. There should have been trolls and dwarves riding the service vehicles, waving phosphorescent wands to guide us in. Instead there were the orange-suited workers in their yellow earmuffs and the somber geometry of the Saarinen terminal sitting half-hidden in the fog.

Shoulder harness in place, I read as Carol drove the rented Buick as though it were a GT Porsche, taking it across three lanes of the Beltway and slotting it into a space that didn't seem to be there.

Charley Kelly's summary of our client's recent history didn't really tell me much Charley himself hadn't on the phone. Moshe Bergman had quit BioTron, one of your major multinationals, in a sort of high-tech huff after his work on biocomputers had been ignored, then scorned—there had even been talk of his having cooked crucial experiments. Now the irate Dr. Bergman was looking for investment capital to develop his process, which had all sorts of weird and profitable potential: eyes for the blind, brain implants, artificial intelligence.

That's where Econtel, Inc.—Carol and I—came in. Tipped by Charley Kelly, who heard about Bergman through a friend at BioTron, we had contacted Bergman and were ready to present him with an investment package. Our cut would be from five to ten points, depending on the extent of our involvement.

We were delaying a Parisian vacation for twenty-four hours to take care of this little piece of business. Then we had reservations on the Air France SST and plans to drive through Bordeaux in a rented BMW Electro.

"You're not going to believe this," I said. Carol was busy edging out a guy in a maroon Saab next to us who wanted to get off at the Key Bridge. "According to Charley, Bergman's hired himself a bodyguard."

"Whatever for?"

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"Thinks BioTron is out to get him."

"Certainly—employing telepathic dogs, no doubt, to steal his valuable processes. Christ, I hope he is not a scientist nutter."

"Kelly says he's mildly eccentric, is all. Anyway, Charley's arranged for us to meet the bodyguard, who will answer all our questions. Ex-CIA, Charley says. Might be interesting."

"You can talk to the cowboy, I'll catch up on some sleep."

We checked into the new Hyatt in Alexandria—near National Airport and the shuttle to Kennedy, where we would catch the SST. The room had pink linen walls and bright Matisse prints; teak Scandinavian dresser, desk, table, chairs, and platform bed. I left Carol in the shower.

I hate driving, so I took the Metro to Silver Spring where I was to meet Bergman's bodyguard, a man named Oakley. He and Bergman were staying at a rooming house nearby.

We met at the Chesapeake Bay Crab Bucket. Just by the Georgia Street Metro, it featured yellow formica and fly-specked mirrors, and you probably wouldn't want a real close look at the kitchen, but the crab cakes were fine, and so was the Rolling Rock beer.

Oakley, on the other hand, seemed to be about ninety-nine percent pure neurotoxin. He made a point of letting me see his pistol, a "hot sight" Colt .357 he told me, almost as soon as we sat down. "Good weapon for this kind of work," he said, holding open his coat to flash the knurled butt end of the Colt.

He was in his middle fifties, a big man with rough skin, thick wrists and jet-black hair which had to have come from a bottle. He said he had retired from "the Company" two years ago but still trained attack dogs for them at a kennel in Falls Church. "Those suckers have got to be brutal," he said. "So you get them big, man, and you hurt them. Pick one up over your head and drop the son of a bitch on the ground. Lay him out good so's he can't breathe. Do it a few times and he knows who's in charge. Get him to do anything. And they do good work, man." He sucked on a Winston and looked at me with intent black eyes. "If Ramos had let me put the dogs in the dining room like I wanted to, they'd never have gotten to him."

I cut short his loving memories of his years with Alejandro Ramos. Other than admiring the sheer horror of it, I wasn't much interested in his Company scrapbook. I wanted to know about Bergman. I said, "What's happening here, Oakley? Is Bergman involved in some kind of corporate spy crap?"

"I don't know, man. The guy's a wimp, and when I met him, he was scared bad, so I figured I could make some easy change by stringing him

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along a ways. But that's not how it went. His condo out in Rockville was solid jammed with voice bugs. So I moved his ass out of there."

I put some cash on the table and said, "We're just businessmen, you know, trying to make a few bucks . . . think of us as pilot fish here in the water with the big corporate sharks. We do *not,* absolutely do not, fuck around with them."

"Look, I ain't telling you your business, but there's been nothing since I moved him. *Perfectamente nada.* So I figure I just flushed some old bugs—I'm sure BioTron runs routine surveillance on high-level employees. I really don't think anything's happening, man."

"Okay, we'll try it a little bit, just a taste. But if you find out any different—like something funny is going down—you come tell me, and *I'll* pay your fee. My wife and I, we're just not into killer dogs in the dining room, you know what I mean?"

"Sure, man, I'll let you know. But I don't think you have to worry. I've been running all the tricks, just to keep busy, and nobody's there. Believe me. . . ."

Carol was asleep when I got back to the room. I showered and crawled into bed beside her. In the curtained twilight I curled against her back. "Umm," she said and pressed against me. "What did you find out?" she asked.

She was awake now, so we discussed Bergman's problems. We agreed to go quick and dirty, to get the package out on the wire tonight if possible. Ordinarily we'd have spent at least a few days waltzing a client and lining up the most likely investors, but not this time. "I'll finish up the prospectus," she said.

She sat at the round teak table, face bright against the gray sky, peach nightgown glowing under a hanging cylinder of chrome. While I settled in for a nap, she worked our hopped-up computer, a SenTrax Optix, and put the final touches on Bergman's package.

Some time later she crawled into bed next to me.

We were both beginning our final semester in graduate school at UCLA when we met. She was getting an M.B.A., and I was finally picking up the M.S. in Telecommunications that I had started five years before. Early marriages along the way had gone sour for both of us. No children.

We told each other these things and a lot else at the party in Santa Monica where we met. At the time she favored black sheath dresses and bright red nails, plastic talons two inches long which cut holes in the air as she talked. Simple, mean, and fetishistic—she punched all my buttons anyway. My knees shook when she leaned close.

Through that whole spring we talked. We walked among the trim green lawns and bright flowers of Westwood, where Japanese gardeners

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with an angel's touch groomed the property of the middle classes. Our previous plans—Data General for me, Bank of America for Carol—shrank to nothing.

Databanks, genetic tailoring, the Japanese space program, optical computers, weather satellites, the commodities markets—we talked of these things, and Carol sketched a possible world in the air with red nails.

After graduation we got a place in the Fairfax District, among the delis, kosher groceries, and Hebrew language newspapers. We started Econtel, Inc. in our living room and ran it there for the next few years—surfing the Third Wave, you might say, with an audience of bearded Hassidic Jews.

Later we moved to Berkeley and bought a two-story brown shingle that cost one hell of a lot more than I'd ever figured myself paying for a house or anything else.

I felt her gown sliding between us as she pulled it over her head, and there was the familiar hot light touch of her breasts against my skin.

Around ten o'clock Oakley showed up with Bergman, who turned out to be a tall, skinny fellow in a cheap suit and the kind of nasal New York accent that cuts to the bone.

He seemed content with the deal we presented. A fat budget for his lab to operate for a year if necessary—Charley had said, "By then, he's either cracked it or gone bust." Forty-nine per cent of patent monies to his backer, forty-five to him, five to Econtel, one to Kelly.

A bit of chitchat, then everybody's signatures and thumbprints went on the contracts. I set up the SenTrax and began by tapping into BIONET, the news service subscribed to by anyone interested in commercial bioscience. Potential investors might not be on it, but their scouts would be. An outline of the process, computer projections for the lab work, references to the NIH and Patent Office files—all were made available, along with a financial summary.

The next few hours are frozen in my memory—the four of us blithe in the champagne glow that comes from putting a project out on the network, never mind that we weren't likely to hear anything for weeks. Bergman was being courtly in an awkward way with Carol, who was all dark blue silk and French perfume, and even Oakley seemed relaxed.

Then Oakley said he wanted to get some more equipment from the car; he'd checked the phone for taps but thought he'd sweep the room as well—I think we all smiled at this. "I'll go with you," I said. "I need to call a client—should have done it before we tied up the phone lines." Carol was talking to Bergman, and as I left she gave me a wink and a smile.

The glass-sided elevator dropped twenty stories down the side of the

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building. Oakley jittered with tension next to me—poor bastard, I thought, not happy unless in the grip of operational paranoia. Interior doors slid back, and we went out, Oakley right toward the parking lot, me left into the lobby.

In a pay booth in the deserted lobby—it was close to two in the morning—I spent half an hour explaining to F. L. Daugherty—a metal-rich eccentric who lived in Boise, Idaho, where it was only eleven—that even blue-chips could take a turn for the worse.

I was alone in the elevator going back. Street lights made small jewels in the mist on the glass. Across the Potomac, the Washington Monument winked to drive airplanes away, the Jefferson Memorial sat bathed in floodlights. I thought that we had done fine—none of the maddening complexities that can turn a simple proposition into a long-term puzzle, just a quick hit and on to Paris. I could almost smell the buttery pastries and dark coffee. . . .

When I began to step into the hallway, there was Oakley in a crouch, his back to me, both hands extended in front of him holding the Colt .357. "What the hell is going on?" I asked, and he said, "They're snatching Bergman and your wife. Stay in the elevator—get the fuck out of here." The Colt jumped in his hand and made one of the loudest noises I'd ever heard.

The doors slid closed, and I pressed *G* and descended to the ground floor, ears ringing.

When the doors opened, I sprinted across the lobby and out to the parking lot, where I stood watching the elevator go back up to the twentieth floor.

It was all so far away. I could just see an indistinct shape, someone in the elevator, then crazywork cracks spread over the glass, and the box began its quick trip down the side of the building. As it got lower, I saw that the glass was splashed with red. I ran back into the lobby.

Oakley lay with his back against the outside wall, bleeding from arm and face and torso. His pistol barrel pointed at me, then drooped. "Oh Jesus Christ," I said. The elevator smelled of burned gunpowder and was splashed with bright fresh blood.

"Go man," he said. "Now. They got them both."

"I'll call an ambulance and the police."

"No! Go away now. No police, or maybe your wife and Bergman are dead. Call 911, you want, tell them a shooting, but mostly get the fuck out of here."

The Metro Station fifty yards away had closed, so I just kept running. I passed under an overpass and turned left, ran up a flight of cement stairs and stopped in front of the sign that said *Amtrak*.

The station seemed centuries old, with its painted slat seats and wood

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and plaster walls. Half a dozen people wandered around the platform outside, and a young girl—maybe twenty, sullen and pale, wrapped in a dark blue cape—sat on one of the benches.

Three pay phones were against the wall—no privacy booths. I dialed 911, then whispered, "There's been a shooting—lobby of the Alexandria Hyatt." I listened long enough to make sure the operator had heard me, then hung up on his agitated questions.

One concession to the information age—a dark train board with red LEDs gave station stops and showed the southbound Miami Express was right on time—in half an hour or so it would come into Alexandria. Behind an iron-barred window, a dark-haired clerk asked if he could help me. He was very cheerful. "Charlotte, North Carolina," I read off the list of stops. I had to tell him something. I paid the fare in cash.

I stood in the fog and drizzle about a hundred yards up the platform, waiting for the train. Across the street, on a hill that loomed above the station, a tall, spired building, lit up by huge floodlights, stood foreshortened, grotesque . . . mausoleum, civic building, some sort of pointless lodge or temple. Soon a bright glow swished back and forth across the tracks, and a slow-moving train fronted by three diesel engines pulled in.

"To your left," the woman in red Amtrak uniform said when I showed her my ticket. "Watch your step."

Soon after the train pulled out, I blanked. Sitting in a nearly empty coach, I stared at a "Dining Car Other Direction" sign at the end of the car and fell into a trance that I didn't come out of until the train began to slow as it pulled into the station at Richmond, Virginia a little after four A.M.

I got up and went into the vestibule between cars. A few people waved from the bright platform as the train pulled away. Rain spit against the glass . . . as it had the elevator . . . oh god, I thought, no—

The train had been moving quickly between opposite-moving lanes of a highway, but it slowed . . . I could see office buildings peeking over the top of an embankment. I pulled the release handle that freed the opening mechanism and cranked the door open, the steps out and down. I jumped out into the night.

Some more time got lost in there. I remember walking along the tracks in the narrow strip formed by double link fences, coming to where a trestle soared high over rocks and black water, then climbing the high link fence, and I remember a group of young black men standing in front of an all-night grocery who watched with predators' attention as I passed. Nothing else.

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When the sun rose, I was standing on a street corner in front of a hologram arcade. A sign in its window read:

BEAT THE DEVIL
BOGART IN FULL HOLO!
SEE THE MOVIE—PLAY THE GAME!

The rain had stopped at some point, so I was merely damp and wrinkled. Still I waved at two cabs before one stopped, and then the old black man in the driver's seat was wary—he kept his window closed and yelled, "Where you going?"

"Airport."

"Needs to see me some money, ace."

I held up my wallet and spread it to show him credit cards and bills. He was to end up with a fifty dollar tip, my thanks for his buying my ticket to San Francisco on the 7:15 non-stop.

It was late morning when we got into SFO, and I dithered. I had to go home—not for clothes and comfort but for some things I really needed, for means to strike back. I took a shuttle bus into the city, then the BART train to Berkeley, where without thinking I got off at the Claremont Station and went down the steps to College Avenue.

And ended up in front of the Hardtack Coffee House. I stepped through the dark glass door. Smells of coffee and tobacco smoke and an atmosphere not of day or night. Name your game: chess, go, backgammon, checkers, simulator, cini-max. Behind a nondescript white-painted stucco front, there was a huge room with square tables of dark wood, tops charred by decades of frenzied smokers, among them some of the best games players in Berkeley, some of the best in the world.

It was a trip into my past. Back when I was a silicon kid, one of the few places we could find people—in the flesh, that is—was the Hardtack. I must have been thirteen when I first discovered the hackers, phone phreaks, network bandits, all the computer cowboys living in the optic fibers, wave guides, old-fashioned copper wires. I tapped into HUMAN HEADZ, the most accessible of the underground networks, and began to meet them one by one. The Zork, from New Jersey, who would stack up long-distance tandems around the globe just to listen to his own voice echoing through the night. E-Muff, from Berkeley, a consistent thorn in the side of the U. C. Computer Police. U-3 Kiddo, a group from Portland who planned free gas and electricity for one month for all Bonneville Power Authority customers—power to the people.

Through them I was admitted to the inner circles and the gossip, rumor, and mad delusion that passed in the midnight hours. The Princess and Ozmo the Dwarf had gotten married over the net but had sworn never to meet in person—it was a purely spiritual connection that gave total

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intimacy through the wires. Frostie had disappeared in Paris, taken away by Interpol, and would never be heard from again. Bright Water, the Hiroshima-Nagasaki group, had sworn vendetta against Boeing because their B-29s had dropped the bombs. Captain Muck had broken into a C^3 system at Omaha and planned to launch a first strike if he didn't—finally—get laid.

It was the heaviest fantasy trip going, until the Federal anti-hacking laws went into effect. Then it turned into something a little too heavy. Anyway the social dynamic had shifted, as another crop of adolescents discovered its own strange pleasures.

But for some the pirate life remained a lifelong obsession. Captain Crunch III, Blind Lemon—also known as The Whistling Kid—and Rolly the Deuce were among the perfect masters, silicon *sensei,* masters of solid-state zen.

Now I was looking for Rolly the Deuce, my one-time personal master, who had taught me some of the more arcane tricks and stood by when I tested them by accessing the FBI's Most Secret files. "Good work," he told me then, "but you won't stay with it." And he was right. By the time I went to college, I was pretty much out of it. I lacked the pure lunar drive that powered the great bandits.

We hadn't exactly stayed in touch. Rolly communicated in his own ways. A few Christmas Eves at the last stroke of midnight, the computer played "Jingle Bell Rock," and once, when Carol and I were printing out some stock figures from the Dow Jones, we got a page blank except for the message, "You're under arrest—violation of the International Meep Statutes. Glad to see you're in the money, but your bank's got lousy security. Love, Rolly."

Anyway, Jesse Woods, who had stayed in touch with Rolly, was playing speed chess with a well-dressed young guy, might have been a chump, might have been a pupil. There was a *beep* as the kid's hand punched the chrome button on top of his clock, an almost simultaneous *beep* as Jesse punched his. "Shit," the kid said, and he was almost out of his chair with tension, searching the board for a move as his right hand hovered over it, the same one he'd have to punch the clock with.

Beep beep beep beep and a bright red light flashed on the kid's clock. The kid slumped in his chair, then said, "I almost had an attack going," and he began setting up pieces. "Can we do it again?"

"No," Jesse said. "I've got a friend waiting."

Dull red snakes of hair dirty like the rest of him, fingernail on the little finger of his left hand curving into a spiral, nose beaked and thin enough to be from a party kit—Jesse was as usual a paragon of bizarre appearance, a sight to scare prospective parents with.

I said, "You seen Rolly?"

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"A little, man. He's fucked up these days, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"Sort of, I don't know, left behind."

"That's all right, Jesse. I need to see him. Where can I call?"

"Nobody's got any of his numbers. He's hiding out, I guess you'd call it. Thinks the FBI is on his case."

"Are they?"

"What do you think, man? That shit's all yesterday's paper."

"So how do I find him?"

"He's in Oakland—" And he gave me directions.

"Good. Look, Jesse, you want to make some quick cash? I need a few things picked up from home, and I can't do it myself."

I had agreed to meet Jesse at Cody's Books on Telegraph Avenue. He loved the idea of an anonymous transfer of the plastic sheath of mini-CDs and the book-thick SenTrax Tele that he had picked up for me at home. Jesse stuck his bundle into one of the wooden slots at the front of the bookstore, and I picked it up a few minutes later.

I walked out of Cody's figuring I had some time to kill. There was no point in trying to get Rolly the Deuce until after dark, not if I wanted him functioning at peak form. He'd have been up all night, ghost dancing in the wires. So I walked toward the campus and along the Avenue, where the sidewalks were crowded with tourists and the multitude of street sellers hustling them.

I stopped at an All-Bank Booth to pull all my and Carol's liquid funds. I didn't know what was likely to happen next, but I figured I might need chunks of money. The voucher spilled out of the slot—when I put my signature and thumbprint to it, it would turn into a very high denomination dollar bill. I noticed that it was made out to me only—Carol's name wasn't on it. Her name wasn't on the account receipt either.

Why was that?

Inside the blanked silence of a street-side phone booth, I plugged in the old SenTrax Tele, long-time hackers' favorite. I ran a program that snagged and ghosted a raw tandem. Now I could call anyone I wanted, and the call would appear to originate through the AmerEx Trouble Line.

CREDITERM was my first call. Using my portable comp and a couple of sweet little utility programs, I accessed their credit records, the sacred books of plastic money. I asked for a read-out on Carol. **NEG REC/REQUERY?** Bullshit. Something peculiar *was* happening. I did it again. **NEG REC/RECONFIRM ID.**

Then I went to the NDB, the National Data Bank, where every citizen is caught in lines of electromagnetic force. Ran Carol's name again—first

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alpha access, which any inquisitive bureaucracy has at its command, then the beta codes, which dig deep to pull up a mass of unverified, undigested garbage. **NO REF** *repeat* **NO REF READDRESS SOC SEC.**

Something ugly came into view then. Just a small dot on the screen, but getting larger—

So I ran the same trip on Bergman. **NO REF** *repeat* **NO REF.**

Negative evidence they call it, the dog that doesn't bark in the night. Great, but evidence of what?

Crowds surged around me on Telegraph Avenue, which was enjoying a resurgence of trade and popularity—nostalgia had taken hold for the twentieth century in general, the "gentle decade" of the 60s in particular. Flower children and all that, never mind the uh *war* that had been going on. Bright sunshine, blue sky, the hot hum of money changing hands. . . .

There I stood, and for the first time I got the feeling that Carol had gone much farther away than I had guessed. Fundamental law of our times: To exist is to be transformed into information, to have NDB files, credit ratings, to be significant data in the computers of banks, police. Corollary: To have no such files—

What kind of crazy-assed game was BioTron playing?

Rolly lived deep in Oakland, in the kind of neighborhood where people clear the street after dark so they don't interfere with the nighttime's quick and violent business. Here, if I saw a group of young men—black, white, yellow, or brown—looking me over, I'd run *now* and hope I had enough of a head start.

I buzzed Rolly's apartment, and he looked me over through the vid-screen and told me to come up. This was a climb through the usual sleazy stairways, past litter, peeling walls, bare bulbs. Rolly had always remained pretty much oblivious to his immediate surroundings; his real life was out in the networks.

When he opened the door, I stepped into a combination of Condo Grosso and Teletronics Heaven. Consoles and bubble boxes in tottering stacks, a bank of flatscreens, snarls of optic fiber and cable, inverted plastic boxes of connectors—all of it junk, kipple, the spill-off from Rolly's constant restructuring of his system, which would be behind a steel door in another room.

Jah rockers danced across the wall; the room reverberated with their slack-string bass and syntho-drums. Scattered around were stacks of empty pizza boxes, piles of tamale wrappers, beer cans, filled ashtrays, dirty clothes. Streamers of print-out were tacked to two walls. Brave New Silicon World.

He looked just as he did the last time I saw him—thinning hair plas-

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tered to his white skull, sallow skin, a roll of fat around his middle. The All-American boy, my friend Rolly.

I walked to the control console and punched off the Jah rockers. "Got to talk, Rolly," I said.

It all came out, and he just stood there, his eyes wide as he listened to the story of blood and pain that he knew—that all of us know—is out there, happening to somebody in the night.

"Man," he said. "Carol . . . I'm sorry."

And that's when I cried a little for the first time. I sat in an old chair and hammered on its stuffed arms and shook with sobs and yelled—

Then I told him *damage*. I wanted to be able to take it to the limit, and quickly, like piranha on a baby goat.

"I'm slack, man," he said, "slack—no chops."

That was bullshit, and he knew it. "I want to hammer these bastards, man," I said. He paced the floor, kicked empty boxes, dithered. Then he began to think about *how to do it*. "I brought my best shit, Rolly," I said, and waved the plastic sheaf of cd's. I had him.

One side of the room was filled with tented plastic—a clean room—where Rolly sat like a man with a congenital immune deficiency or a caterpillar in its chrysalis. In front of him were the flat silver rectangles of viewscreens; behind them, bare processor chips, small dark blocks on legs of fine golden filament. To one side were processor and bubble boxes, traditional cubes of multi-hued red, next to chrome-armed chip burners and flat black wave guide boxes. Connecting all were knots of flesh-toned cable and strands of optic fiber sheathed in carnival colors. Inside the clean room the whole multiplexed electronic package could lie open like an autopsied corpse.

He worked through the night, with me providing occasional suggestions and doing the routine work, the stuff that didn't require Rolly's level of cunning and artistry. He sweated, and his face was red; he played his keyboards like a virtuoso and kept his modems alive most of the night as he called in favors from all over the country.

Lethe, a seventeen-year-old girl from Long Island, had a sweet set of monetary transfer access and com codes. Johnny Too Bad in Austin had played games with the Stock Exchange and had worked out a very slick series of burns. Anon-Al, a translator at Fort Meade for NSA, had the real prize—a piece of killer software cooked by some Agency hotshots to demonstrate how any databank could be turned to hash. It should work once on just about anything. Or on everything. He hit these fellow souls within the first two hours, and from there it rolled.

I sat much of the night back in the front room, sitting in the old stuffed corduroy chair, pulling stuffing out of a tear and thinking. I kept re-

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turning to what the silicon kids used to call a "K-9 anomaly"—a program doing things it was never intended to do and shouldn't be capable of. A werewolf program.

For instance: BioTron could have nailed us at the Hyatt (no real problem there, as we were using standard industrial encryption and unscrambled lines), and they *might* have been able to remove Carol from our checking accounts, but they *couldn't* have pulled Carol and Bergman from CREDITERM and the NDB—no way. Negative evidence all right, of the impossible.

I thought, screw it. No accounting for the weirdness of The Real.

Early the next morning we had located BioTron's heaviest clandestine hitter, the guy who would have ultimate control of any operation like this one. Using programs out of a switch-and-dummy box hooked to a local switchboard in Buenos Aires so that a backchase was impossible, we addressed a message to T. Edward Shales, BioTron's counter-intelligence chief without portfolio.

Our message was pretty simple: let's deal; if you don't want to, we've got some bad economic news for you. Have a look at LiveSoft Projects, we told him; its stock will have *disappeared,* and it's going to cost someone a hell of trouble to bring it back. Then think about the implications.

We got the usual "don't know what you're talking about, never heard of such terrible happenings" reply within an hour. Rolly skimmed it off the B. A. dummy, and we both had a sour laugh.

Then we waited for hell to freeze.

By nine o'clock that night brimstone had turned to solid ice, and we both were ready to collapse.

Finally, BioTron's reply. On the tape, T. Edward Shales himself—heavy and solid and anonymous—sat in dark-suited splendor and said, "I believe you got a problem, really I do. But we are not it. I did not authorize the incursion you describe, and I can categorically state that no one else in this corporation did. In short, you have got some disinformation here somewhere.

"Dr. Moshe Bergman was an employee of ours, but his period of post-resignation surveillance showed nothing important. We are also aware of the man Oakley, who as you say has been shot—his short-term future appears uncertain, according to the George Washington University Hospital computer.

"Frankly, however, we thought Bergman was of no further concern to us. Now, however, we do have an interest in this affair. Should you wish our assistance, we can perhaps negotiate terms. We would be particularly interested in quick restoration of LiveSoft's portfolio."

That tape hurt me. Remember, putting the crush on BioTron was all

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I had, and I saw that I couldn't. They were ignoring me; despite what we had showed them, we appeared to have no leverage. I said, "Rolly, I want to do it tonight, I want to hit them like we planned."

"No, man. It's like uh . . . shit . . . nuclear deterrence. Like, when you've got to use it, man, then shit—" Like many silicon kids, Rolly had an uncertain grip on words—Carol said they were people who had no native language.

It came to me all at once then, and I don't know whether I believed it or not. But I had to have him, I couldn't do this by myself.

So here's what I told Rolly, and you've got to understand, I was driven by my need and dancing in the dark. I worked with questions like these: What if I was right the first time, and BioTron *couldn't* have done these things? What then if T. Edward Shales wasn't lying?

I told Rolly that we had hold of something strange, not BioTron but the spirit of our times, the living essence of the information age. We are its senses, the datanets its nervous system and memory, all the interchanges among systems its consciousness. Not a werewolf program, but Gaia in silicon, born of wire and electromagnetic wave—new life, new being.

"Do you really believe that?" he asked. I had shaken him, he was seeing the descent of some testing angel into the dark night of his soul.

And I did for a moment, nodding, as I reached to him out of my absolute need and said, "It's all that makes sense." The datanets were the key, I said. Gaia must have been brought into being by the saturation of the planet with information, and the nets are the loci. I said that INFINET was crucial, and its creation was the point of transformation, the birth of Gaia. So that's where we would go after it.

I told Rolly I was going to use Gaia's senses, its nervous system and memory, against it.

Early the next morning I was back in the nether world I had first discovered as an adolescent, where space, time, and identity are blurred, "real time" is just a choice among others, and what really matters is the flexible, multi-dimensional spacetime of the networks.

Using BART, I covered the Bay Area. From one station to another I would go, then out to find a pay phone. Pop the phone receiver into the computer's blue-green modem, a silver disk into the computer. RUN the programs, disconnect, go.

I was sowing chaos. Gaia couldn't tell good data from bad, so the programs I fed into it were just the usual stuff of its perceptions.

Banque Nationale de Paris and Credit Lyonnais, Bayerische Vereinsbank and Deutsche Bank, Frankfort, Barclays and National Westminster Bank, Citibank and Bank of America, Union Bank of Switzerland, Dai-

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Ichi Kangyo Bank of Tokyo, Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation—I forget how many others, but I was forming the heaviest conglomerate that ever hit the markets and exchanges to make some heavyweight purchases: BASF Aktiengesellschaft, Chiyoda Chemical, Dupont, ICI, Standard Oil of New Jersey, Sony Corporation, and BioTron itself, oh yes . . . run the programs, promise payment in cash, stock, options. Stocks, futures, currency, you bet. We made pretty good efforts to corner the silver market—the Hunt brothers would have been envious—pork belly and potato futures. . . .

Some purchases and manipulations would go through, some wouldn't. And pretty soon someone was going to figure out that there was some strange and illegal action taking place. Confusion—markets scrambled, stocks, futures, and currencies in disarray. At one level, just another tender of our bona fides, a promise to Gaia—we can touch you; at another level, *diversions*.

I was really after INFINET, the network of networks, but I couldn't hit it straight on. It was too well defended without more lead time than I'd had. But some of the older auxiliaries did just fine. We got in.

INFINET had programs which allowed it to read from and write to everything that was in its member networks, which included about every civilian network in the world, along with the low-to-medium parts of military networks such as ARPANET. I was planting into INFINET that lovely hostile software that NSA had created.

If it's triggered, INFINET and the member networks will disappear in the world's biggest information crash. The only uncertainty regards the military nets—how good are their countermeasures? Well, we may find out.

All night long we had put the programs together, and now I planted them. READ, WRITE, LIST, ERASE—one instruction's just like another to a computer. Garbage in, pal, garbage in.

Remember those tapes—we've all seen them—of buildings getting torn down? Silence and slow motion is the way I like to see it happen, masonry and invisible iron frame looming high and still, then disintegrating and dropping straight into itself, turning into no more than a pile of rubble where a building used to stand, just something for the dump trucks to carry away.

Doesn't matter how big the building is, or how strong. You just find the right spots and plant your charges. . . .

So I planted my charges, then went home.

I took the house computer out of its passive mode, told it yes, I was answering calls, and sat in the study. Was everything I had said to Rolly a con and delusion?

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I watched the slow turn of our light sculpture. It was a copy of the Charles Cohen "Illuminations IX" in the Museum of Modern Art. Blue, red, yellow, white, green—the colors formed their geometric patterns. Along with double jet-lag and exhaustion from anxiety and fear, the patterns hypnotized me. I slept.

I was awakened by a high-pitched, pulsing sound—a thousand satellites holding a family reunion, maybe, or calling home. The display screen on the opposite wall came alive and was filled with racing lines of characters, and both printers chattered as paper boiled out of them.

Then the light sculpture began a crazy dance. Sheets of light formed, grids of color appeared on them, and they folded and twisted as if in a strong wind. Doughnuts and spheres, regular and irregular polyhedrons, bundles of rods and cones, spiraling helices—these figures and others climbed from floor to ceiling, then raced away down lines of vanishing perspective.

A rod of green light jumped from the sculpture and flashed to the middle of the room. From its tip a point of white light grew, and the rod disappeared, leaving the point behind, pulsating to the high-pitched sounds.

Cute high-tech tricks, I wanted to tell myself, but it didn't feel that way. What it felt like was *something was saying hello.* There seemed to be a cold wind blowing through the room.

Metal clanged in the printers, and they stopped. The display screen sagged like a Dali watch and went out. Ruby-red tubes of laser light cartwheeled through the room, searing the walls and furniture and setting afire the paper that had spilled onto the floor.

I stood in some still center, untouched by light and fire.

Everything ceased at once, leaving behind the yellow flicker of burning paper and the shrill whistle of the smoke alarm. I got the extinguisher from the kitchen and put out the fires, then sat down.

And I'm still sitting, still waiting. But while I'm waiting, I decided to put this story on the wire—it's addressed to BioTron, but that doesn't matter because I know you will be sure to get it.

That's right, I'm talking to *you,* because it looks like you're there after all.

So listen:

The programs are inside you, and if I don't stop them—soon—they run. You could try to disarm them, but one mistake and the networks get hashed. Ever hear of an information sink? You put information in, and it goes . . . where the wild goose goes, where the woodbine twineth. You get my point: that's your *mind* I'm after.

Here's the way it seems to me. You used BioTron like white cells to

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attack a disease—sent out orders, I would imagine, that the recipients followed because you knew just how to give them.

Because you fear bio-computers. I am guessing Carol was in the wrong place at the wrong time; Bergman was the real disease carrier. Charley said they might make artificial intelligence possible. Is that it? Would they be *competition?*

You removed Carol and Bergman from the public record, I know that much. Would have complicated matters if I had gone to the police. "Carol who? Doesn't exist. It says so right here." Or did you just panic? If you're alive and intelligent, that's possible.

But I don't really know much, just this: if Carol's dead, you are, too. If you don't exist, and I'm wrong, too bad, because the information economy is about to suffer its first catastrophic collapse.

So what's it going to be? Fill your hand, stranger? Bet your life?

Don't! I love her, I need her. Just give her back.

I'm waiting. ●

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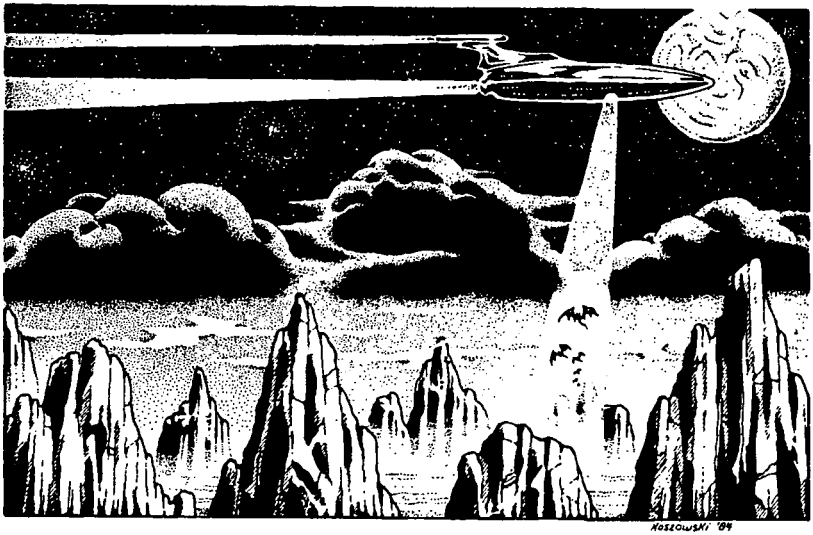

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GLASS

by Nancy Kress

art: Judy Mitchell

The author's most recent story for *IAsfm* was "Cannibals" (May 1987). Her next novel is *An Alien Light*, coming in early 1988 from Arbor House.

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Four people stood on the wide shallow steps in front of the library. One of them would be dead before dark.

As always, I couldn't tell which one. The moment came and went too fast, enveloping them in the familiar thickened air shot through with faint blue lines like living veins. Last summer, student-slumming through Europe with Janet, I stood frozen before the exquisite striped glass for sale all around the Piazza San Marco. Janet, puzzled and exasperated, had to pull me away: "What is it, Cath? For God's sake, if you want the vase, buy it—don't worship it!" Janet, who had landed at Kennedy customs with exuberantly fake cameos, four rosaries guaranteed blessed by thé Pope, and seven dolls in different versions of native provincial dress, all made of shiny red satin.

She loped out of the library and down the steps, long skinny legs scissoring in counterpoint to her long skinny flying hair, calling to me from ten yards away. "Cath! You're on time, you're always on time, it's so incredibly boring!" She laughed, a laugh that would be straight from the belly if she had one, a laugh unchanged since we were both six years old. Then she came close enough, and her face changed. "What is it, what's wrong?"

She had rushed right past the four on the steps, noticing them only as obstacles, shapes to not bump into. I tried to not notice them either, but it was impossible. It always is. An overweight woman, a small child, an old man leaning on a cane, a young man holding a book. Still, I refused details. I have learned that much, at least.

I managed to say, "Nothing is wrong. You're late."

"And you're not." She laughed again and her head tilted back, towards the blue October sky. That made her blink and shake her head. I thought yet again how exaggerated Janet's gestures always were, how open. She leaned towards me and rolled her eyes. "Wait till you see him!"

I felt myself smiling, horribly, my face cracking open and gaping. I heard myself say, "Where are your glasses?"

"Broken again. Not to worry, roomie, I've got the fastest squint in the East. Wait—is that him over there, talking to whoever?"

The two men still stood on the steps. The woman and child had moved towards the street; another woman called "Sue!" and hurried up to them. The two women embraced. The child, a girl with skimpy brown hair, stared at them from round eyes in a chinless face that would never be pretty. Like all toddlers, she had the look of knowing things she couldn't possibly know. I looked away, which made her transfer her ancient gaze to me.

"That *is* him," Janet said. "Hey, Jack! Yo!"

The young man raised his hand, then went back to talking to the old man. Janet whispered to me in her tough-guy imitation, "Check 'im out,

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Milecki." Then she noticed the little girl and began making faces at her. The child slithered to the safety of the back of her mother's legs, burying her face in the hollow between green polyester thighs.

The retreat did not deter Janet. Nothing deters Janet. She dropped to her knees, jeans scraping briefly against the leaf-covered sidewalk, and sang, "I seeeeeeeee you!" Twisting her head, she peered up at me. "Look at him talking to Dr. Jarlson. Physics Chair. Jack gets straight A's, every fucking test. Told you he was a brain, didn't I? And he's generous with it. Tim says if it weren't for Jack, he'd still think quasars were Japanese TV tubes. And all *you* have to do is just loosen up a little."

The child peeked around her mother's left knee, scowling. There was a tiny white scar, barely visible, on her chin. My little brother Roddy had exactly the same scar, from falling forward as he climbed into the school bus and hitting his chin on the top step. He couldn't catch himself; he had zipped his arms inside his jacket while pretending to be an earthworm.

"I seeeeeee you," Janet crooned. The child scowled harder, then stopped as sunlight flashed off Janet's ring. The mother glanced towards us, smiled. Blonde hair held by a green plastic barrette, no make-up, tired eyes, windbreaker with a shiny zipper. I watched helplessly, the mute panic starting to roll over me in waves.

"I seeeeee you. Can I ask what her name is?"

"Jennifer Ann. Jennie."

"See the pretty, Jennifer Ann?" Janet held out her hand. The engagement ring was glass, not diamond, a "stand-in" until Tim could afford the real thing. I suspected that Janet preferred the stand-in; she laughed the one time I accused her of this. As she moved the ring towards the little girl, her hand moved into shadow and the glass returned to dullness. Jennifer switched her gaze to Janet's face.

On the library steps, at the edge of my vision, the young man shook hands with Dr. Jarlson, turned, and started towards us. And then it happened, the thing I hate worse than the death itself, the thing I can sometimes avoid but not now, not this time, not when I wanted to. Everyone froze because the moment froze, deepened, turned lush with preternatural brightness. I felt it detach itself from the normal blur of ordinary, sequential moments and become something else, a separate reality that would adhere to me in sharp and unfading detail the rest of my life. The ordinary metastasized to violation. Like cancer:

Dr. Jarlson, leaning on his cane, blue silk ascot and frayed cuffs, the lines in his face soft and eroded as sand gullies. The overweight mother's bitten nails, more ragged on the left hand than on the right; the tiny mole just above the collar of her windbreaker; a bluish bruise beside it: a hickey. The faint round corneal orbits of her friend's contact lenses.

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Jennifer scowling again at Janet, the stitching loose on her soiled pink Winnie-the-Pooh parka, sunlight lending gloss to the wispy hair. And Jack standing on the library steps, too tall and too thin in a brown cable-knit sweater with the lumpy seams of hand-knitting, his uplifted arm frozen forever in greeting to Janet.

Then she stood up and brushed the leaves from the knees of her jeans.

"Jack, this is Cath Milecki. Cath, Jack Naven."

"Hi," Jack said. "I've heard a lot about you."

"From *me*," Janet said. "All good, all true. She's wonderful, she's unique, ask anybody."

He smiled. "Rein it in, Janet. You're embarrassing your friend."

"*Me*? Embarrass anybody?"

"Well, look at her. Unless, Cath, you always go around with that stunned expression."

"She's stunned by you," Janet said. "What did I tell you?" She began a clumsy clog step on the sidewalk, humming "Love Is In The Air." "Well, since you two obviously want to go somewhere to discuss all my shining virtues. . . ."

Jack shook his head, smiling at me, an invitation to share his amusement at Janet's outrageousness. I could see his amusement. I could see his affection, his slight embarrassment, his physical reaction to me. I could see all of him.

He said, "Really, Janet . . . what do you say, Cath? Should we go have a cup of coffee and dig all the dirt on good old Janet?"

"No."

They both stared at me. I had heard my own tone. Jack looked as if I had slapped him; Janet gaped in astonishment. I curled the fingers of my left hand into my right and dug in until I could feel blood. An old trick. It let me speak.

"I'm sorry. I don't feel well. I'm sorry. I better go back to the dorm."

"Yes. Sure," Jack said awkwardly. The muscles around his mouth tightened. Janet grabbed an arm and pulled at me.

"Time out for a girlish huddle. Jack, you stay right there and don't move an inch. Think about black holes or something. Cath, in my office. On the double."

She tugged me towards the library steps. Jack gazed down the street, his uncertain anger still uncertain, not yet hardened enough to let him stalk away. I thought he must feel like a perfect fool.

"What are you *doing*?" Janet hissed. "Here's this completely wonderful man asking to meet you, obviously bowled over by your gorgeous self when he does, and you cut him off at the knees. What's with you, Cath? Do you want to spend every last night studying alone in the dorm? Every last one?"

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She glared down at me from her five-inch advantage, needing even for five inches to squint a little. My left palm was slippery with blood.

"He *likes* you, Cath. I can tell. Can't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, does he totally gross you out, or what? Could you maybe admit there's a slight chance you possibly might like him back, perhaps?"

I didn't answer.

Janet sighed. "Cath? I don't get it. Talk to me, Cath."

I felt dizzy. This was the first time it had happened like this. I never got to meet them. Janet held my arm too tight; there were needles in my wrist, in my fingers. I fought off that swooping black blur that meant fainting. Not here, not here.

"Janet—*he could be the one.*"

But there was no way she could understand that. "The one? The one for what? For love? For sex? For laughs? So have a cup of coffee and find out—what on earth do you have to lose?"

I made myself look away. Janet let go of my arm. I could feel her gaze move over my face, searching and concerned. Beyond her Jack stared pointedly at the line of the library roof against the sky. The two women gestured at each other and talked at the same time; the one who was not Jennifer's mother raised her hand to shield her eyes in theatrical despair, then laughed through spread fingers. At the end of the street, the limping figure of Dr. Jarlson turned the corner. The red car came from the library parking lot, already too fast, less than thirty feet away. I saw Jack turn, and I saw the moment his face changed as he dropped his book and barreled towards the street. Notebook paper fluttered from between the pages like white leaves.

Jennifer raised her small face. Brakes squealed. The mother's face went to pieces. Jack pushed past her but he was too late: her scream and Janet's came the same second as the thud of flesh on metal, both screams less shrill than the screech of brakes followed by the clash of metal on metal as the red car swerved broadside and plowed into a jeep parked across the street, Winnie-the-Pooh crushed in the grillwork between them.

We sat in the back booth of a bar none of us would have chosen, Janet and I together and Jack across from us. Janet's hands were still shaking. Her eyes, red and swollen from crying, kept darting around the table without meeting either of ours. I held her left hand tightly; on the table top Jack grasped the right. "It happened so fast!"

"I know," I said. She had said the same thing at least thirty times. Jack and I exchanged worried glances. Janet's glass ring, unseen, cut into my fingers.

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"I keep seeing the mother, you know? Afterward. Kneeling in the street like that, with all the blood, and that baby . . ."

"Sshhh," I said, senselessly. "Sssshhhh, Janet."

Our drinks sat untouched, ice cubes melting. Jack bent his head a little and his hair fell forward over his face. The thick dark hair needed cutting. He hadn't cried like Janet, like me, but the skin around his mouth had a pinched, soft look; I thought confusedly of Dr. Jarlson's old face, his hurt leg.

"It just happened so *fast*." Suddenly Janet gathered up her coat, books, purse. "Look, I have to go. Tim gets out of class in ten minutes. I said I'd meet him."

"I'll go with you," Jack said.

"No, no—I'm fine."

I said, "We'll both go with you. Please, Janet."

She stopped scrambling for her things and looked directly at me from puffy eyes. Almost never, not in all our years together, had I seen Janet's face in repose, without her usual frantic animation, quiet clear to the skull.

"I'd rather you didn't come with me, Cath. You either, Jack. Tim will be waiting for me and I'd rather tell him by myself about . . . this, and just be with him, you know?"

"We know," Jack said. Janet smiled painfully and slid out of the booth. I watched her cross the bar and open the door. A rectangle of light fell inwards, narrowed, disappeared.

Jack leaned towards me across the table. "You all right?"

"I'm all right."

"Are you sure? Sometimes it's the people who don't scream and cry over something like that, who hold it all in, who hurt the most." Abruptly, incongruously, he blushed. "I don't mean to psychoanalyze you, I know I hardly know you. I'm sorry. I just thought that if you wanted to talk about what happened, or anything, I'd like to listen."

"Thanks," I said. I tried to smile at him, failed. To cover that, I reached for my coat and said, "Janet will be all right, too."

"I know. She has Tim. They have a good thing going."

"Yes. And she's brave. She's always been brave. I've known her all my life."

"Brave?" He looked for a moment as if he didn't understand, and then as if he did. "Yeah, you're right. I know what you mean. She is."

"I don't know what I would do if it had been her," I said, amazed that I could say it to him, amazed that I could say it at all.

He fumbled with his beer. "Can I walk you to your next class, Cath?"

I was afraid it might happen again but the moment stayed put, mercifully in sequence, no more distinct than any other. Still, I knew I would

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remember him in that particular moment: hopeful quizzical eyes, hair falling over his forehead, neck strong over the clumsy cable-knit of the brown sweater. There was no thickening around him, no blue-veined glass. He had not been the one, after all. Instead, he was like the others, the ones left behind: like Dr. Jarlson with his arthritic limp, like Jennifer's mother sobbing in the bloody street. Like me. He kept on looking at me and he smiled, uncertain and shadowed but still a smile, stronger than his blushing or his fumbling with the beer. They were brave people, Janet and Tim and Jack. Very brave.

"Well?" he said.

"You can't walk me anywhere," I said, and got up and went out and left him there. ●

LOSING SOULS TO CALIFORNIA DREAMING

Returning altered
they never telephone.
If you call
the conversation lags:
silence
flat as the plains.
Because of that land of dreams
they have learned a different reality:
you are a dream,
recalled only vaguely
from a night spent
in a cold land.
California calls them,
their minds forever tanned
and turning towards the sun
and the sea
roars in their ears
so they do not hear you say
goodbye.

June/July 1982
Revised April 1986
—Roger Dutcher

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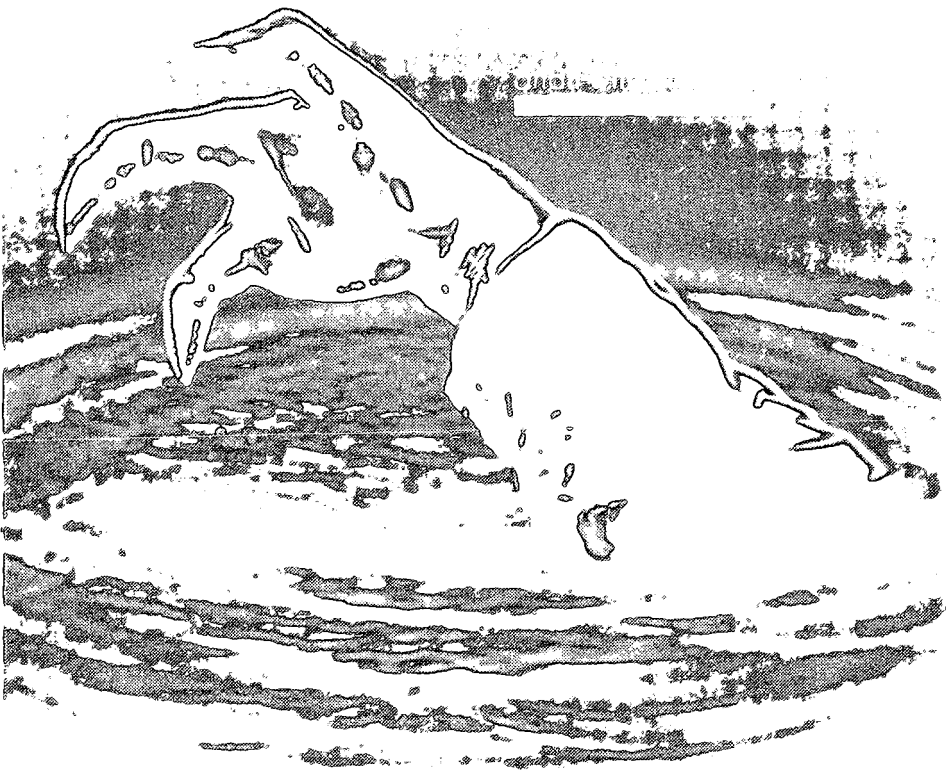

by Andrew Weiner

THE ALIEN IN THE LAKE

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art: J.K. Potter

1.

There was a police car parked down by the jetty, its flashing lights reflecting off the rippling waters of the lake, its radio murmuring softly of distant crimes. The night was coming down, but the police officers in the boat could see well enough to cast their net.

Other cars had pulled up on the lakeshore road. Their drivers watched as the boat came in, dragging its strange cargo.

2.

A man fishing in a small boat had seen the body floating in the lake. At first he thought it was a bundle of old clothes. But when he prodded it with an oar it was altogether too solid. And then an arm had floated up and there was no longer any doubt.

The hand on the end of the arm was rather unusual, and perhaps even frightening, having only three claw-like fingers. But the man in the boat did not notice that. It was unusual and frightening enough for him to be finding a dead body in the lake, let alone a dead alien.

3.

"God," said the police officer, as they tipped the body out of the net and rolled it onto its back. "What happened to his face?"

"Water can do funny . . . " his partner began, and then suppressed the remark.

Water could do funny things to a corpse after a while, but it could not give it an extra eye in the middle of its forehead, or a six-inch-long trunk for a nose, or thick wavy tendrils instead of hair sprouting from its head. Water could not do those things.

4.

There were procedures to be followed in such cases, and they were followed in this one, despite the unusual circumstances.

The local coroner examined the body and quickly concluded that the alien had not drowned, but had in fact been murdered. The local coroner was only a country doctor, and there were considerable morphological differences between the body of the alien and the usual run of cadavers, but he had no great difficulty in establishing the cause of death. He had seen enough bullet wounds in his time, after all.

5.

The murdered alien had been wearing an overcoat, a thick bright green muffler, jeans, shirt, and underwear, all purchased from the local general store some months before, along with a pair of mittens which had not been recovered from the lake.

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The store owner, Mr. Mills, recalled that the buyer of these items had been Lola Briggs. "Tall, good-looking blonde woman, early forties, I'd say," he told the police. "Comes into the store from time to time, although she lives further up around the lake."

Lola Briggs was married to Gus Briggs, the caretaker for a complex of vacation cottages.

"Not that he takes much care of them," Mills said. "They're in very poor repair. And Briggs is always disappearing for weeks or months at a time, even at the height of the season, going off drinking and gambling and womanizing but mostly drinking, leaving her to take care of things. And when he's home he makes all kinds of trouble, there isn't a bar in town that will serve him anymore."

Briggs, apparently, was off on yet another of his little jaunts. Or at least, Mills had not seen him in months. Lola Briggs had come to the store alone to buy the clothes. He had wondered who they were for, because they were too small to fit Gus. Later he had found out.

He had been walking to church one Sunday with his wife, and they had seen them together, Lola and the man who had turned out not to be a man, strolling down the main street and looking in the windows. He had known immediately that it could not be Gus. Gus was all of six feet tall, where this man hardly came to Lola's shoulders.

The man was wearing the coat and he had the muffler wrapped tightly over his face. "I thought that was odd because it was quite warm, really unseasonably warm for the time of year," Mills said. "The fellow must have been sweltering under that muffler, and I said as much to my wife."

"Perhaps he doesn't want to be seen with her," Mrs. Mills had told him. "Not that it will do him any good when Gus comes back. He'll find out about all this and he'll find him, don't you worry. The temper on that man. But you can't blame the poor woman. You really can't."

She had not known then, of course, to what lengths Lola had been driven by her errant husband.

6.

Lola Briggs' nearest neighbor, old Mrs. Donnegan, was not surprised.

"I thought there was something funny about him," she told the police. "The way he always kept that scarf over his face, and the hat so low down on his head, always, no matter what the weather, he claimed he was bronchial. And the way he walked, scuttled more like. And he never did look you in the eye. And half the time he would never as much as say hello, and if he did it was in this funny high-pitched voice.

"Of course, Lola always did have funny tastes in men, that's for sure. Still, who would have thought she would take up with a Martian, or whatever?"

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Mrs. Donnegan had not seen Gus Briggs in, oh, six months. It was the longest time he had ever gone off on his wanderings, and this time, Lola had confided to her one day, he was gone for good. Or so she had believed. Good riddance, Mrs. Donnegan had thought.

The man in the muffler had just appeared on the scene one day. One day he wasn't there, the next he was. He didn't have a car, the nearest bus station was twenty miles away, and she hadn't seen a cab pull up, but one day there he was, coming out of the caretaker's cottage with Lola.

Lola had introduced him as her cousin, although Mrs. Donnegan hadn't believed that for a moment.

"He wasn't the first, you know," Mrs. Donnegan told the police. "A woman like that, she has certain needs, if you understand what I mean. And when the cat's away, and when you can't stand him even when he's home . . . Well, I've seen quite a few come and go over the years. He wasn't the first, but he sure was the strangest."

Sometimes she saw the two of them go out for a walk by the lake, or for a drive in Lola's car, but mostly they just seemed to stay home, behind drawn curtains. Lola had plenty of time on her hands, it being off-season and the cottages almost always empty.

She had wondered, of course, what they could be *doing* in there. And now, of course, she wondered even more.

And then one day, about a week ago, Gus had come home. Driven up his beat-up old pickup and gone into the house. And the next day Lola had had a terrible bruise on her face. And after that she had not seen the man in the muffler again.

She had not heard any gun shots. But her hearing was not the best these days.

7.

"Sure I did it," Gus said. The police had read him his rights when they entered the cottage, but he was very drunk at the time and may not have fully understood them. "Sure. You got some law against killing geeks?"

He had shot the alien down where he stood, on the living room carpet; there was still a funny green stain there under the throw rug. The alien had offered no resistance. Later he had dragged the body out and dumped it in the lake. He had considered killing Lola too, but he had decided to forgive her, although he still couldn't bring himself to touch her.

"What would you have done?" Gus demanded. "You come home and find your wife shacked up with some alien geek. What would you have done?"

Later, on advice from his lawyer, Gus would recant on this confession and plead self-defense.

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8.

The alien had left no belongings, no mechanical devices, no documents. He had arrived with nothing, Lola told the authorities, showing up at her door in the middle of the night naked and green and dripping wet.

It was not even clear that the alien was intelligent, although Lola insisted that he was, and several townspeople reported brief verbal exchanges with him.

"He talked mainly with his mind," Lola said. "Later I taught him some words and he picked up some more from the TV, but he wasn't much interested in them. Mostly he would touch your mind, sort of, brush against it with pictures or feelings. That was how I knew not to be scared, that first night when he showed up at my door."

Lola did not know how the alien had come to Earth.

"Some sort of spaceship, I suppose. How else would he get here?"

A thorough search of the surrounding area failed to locate any transportation device. If the alien had arrived via a spaceship, it was no longer in evidence.

She did not know where, exactly, the alien had come from.

"Some star or another," she said. "He pointed it out to me one time, but I forget which one it was."

Neither was she able to recapture this information, even under hypnosis.

There was no doubt, however, that the alien was indeed an alien. Exhaustive study of his internal organs and genetic materials confirmed as much.

9.

The authorities, of course, were deeply concerned about the affair. They were concerned that the alien might have been a spy, the spearhead of an approaching alien invasion, although it was very hard to imagine what the alien could have been spying on, up there in the backwoods.

They were concerned, too, that even if the alien's intentions had been friendly, his alien comrades might now return to exact vengeance for his death.

Naturally, the authorities questioned Lola closely about the alien, and the nature of his mission on Earth. She was not, however, particularly helpful on this score.

"Sometimes I got the feeling that he was lost," she said. "Although maybe he only *felt* like he was lost, down here among all us strange folks, felt like a stranger even to himself. I've felt like that myself, sometimes."

As far as she could tell, the alien had not been making any systematic study of the planet and its civilizations.

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"He didn't ask me questions or anything. Sometimes he liked to drive around and look at buildings and animals and things. He especially liked to watch the ducks down by the lake. But mostly he preferred to stay home, just the two of us.

"He watched quite a bit of TV, the game shows mainly, he couldn't get enough of them. And the soaps sometimes. He was never much on the news. And he liked listening to the country station. He especially liked Willie Nelson, he would hum the tunes to me sometimes when we were in bed."

The alien had liked her cooking, although it turned out that a lot of foods made him sick. Mostly what he ate was fish, he could hold that down well enough. And diet cola, he could go through that by the six-pack.

It made her cry just to think about it, him sitting there on her couch guzzling diet cola and humming along in that funny way of his to "Stardust."

That was his favorite song, "Stardust," although he was also very partial to "Moonlight in Vermont."

10.

The scientists appointed by the authorities to investigate the matter wanted to know what Lola had *done* with the alien, other than take long walks and watch TV and listen to country music. They wanted to know about the sexual side of their relationship, if indeed there was such a side.

The scientists were by no means certain as to the alien's sexual identity, if any. Autopsy results as to the alien's means of reproduction had been ambiguous, to say the least, with one camp concluding that it was essentially mammalian while another found strong evidence of oviparous characteristics and still another held out for parthenogenesis.

Later, in a similar spirit of inquiry although with less purely scientific intent, a number of tabloid newspapers would pose much the same questions. Lola was willing to tell them all she could, talking freely in the case of the government scientists, and in return for suitable recompense in the case of the highest-bidding tabloid. But it was just so hard for her to describe.

"Mostly he hummed to me, and burrowed deep into my mind. Not literally you understand, he hardly laid a claw on me, not that it would have bothered me, but with his own mind, going real deep inside. And in a strange kind of way, it was very sexy, you know. Sexier than any man I'd ever known, and I've known a few.

"I don't know what it was like for him, but he seemed to enjoy it. In my own way I loved the funny-looking thing.

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"When Gus came home and found us together I told him, honey it don't mean nothing. But it did, you know, it really did.

"I warned him about Gus, of course, what Gus might do to him if he ever came back. But he didn't seem worried about it. And when Gus came in, he didn't try to run. He just stood there and let him shoot. It was like, if he couldn't have me, there was no place else he wanted to be."

11.

The trial of Gus Briggs went all the way to the Supreme Court where the alien, in a landmark decision, was adjudged to be under the protection of local criminal statutes. Briggs was found guilty of murder in the second degree and sentenced to seven years in jail, serving three before his parole.

Lola Briggs divorced her husband and moved to Florida, where she bought a condo with the proceeds from the sale of her memoirs. Subsequently she remarried, to a retired milkman. Her new husband was quiet and gentle and made her reasonably happy. But she still thought about the alien from time to time, and how he had burrowed into her. And she never could listen to "Stardust" again without coming close to tears.

No alien invasion materialized, and no further aliens were seen.

12.

The murder of the alien, and the trial of Gus Briggs, naturally aroused great public interest. Leading national commentators descended on the small resort town. They talked a great deal about the futility of it all, of the alien coming all that way, crossing that inconceivably vast distance, to die in some squalid domestic dispute in a backwoods resort town.

Why, they wondered, could the alien not have come to New York, or some other major metropolis, to have intelligent and meaningful discourse with the country's finest minds, to take in the ballet and the opera and dine in the best restaurants?

Why had he chosen instead to shack up with an aging blonde bimbo, to watch ducks and hum along with Willie Nelson tunes and finally get himself gunned down by her wretched excuse for a husband?

Why, why, why?

It was all, they agreed, so terribly futile.

And Lola Briggs, who had known him best, who alone had known him for what he was, could only say, "Maybe he knew what he was doing." ●

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THE SECRET SHARER

by Robert Silverberg

The following is both an awesome tale of travel in hyper-dimensional space and an unusual, and touching, love story. We are pleased to be publishing this powerful novella by one of today's masters of science fiction.

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It was my first time to heaven and I was no one at all, no one at all, and this was the voyage that was supposed to make me someone.

But though I was no one at all I dared to look upon the million worlds and I felt a great sorrow for them. There they were all about me, humming along on their courses through the night, each of them believing it was actually going somewhere. And each one wrong, of course, for worlds go nowhere, except around and around and around, pathetic monkeys on a string, forever tethered in place. They seem to move, yes. But really they stand still. And I—I who stared at the worlds of heaven and was swept with compassion for them—I knew that though I seemed to be standing still, I was in fact moving. For I was aboard a ship of heaven, a ship of the Service, that was spanning the light-years at a speed so incomprehensibly great that it might as well have been no speed at all.

I was very young. My ship, then as now, was the *Sword of Orion,* on a journey out of Kansas Four bound for Cul-de-Sac and Strappado and Mangan's Bitch and several other worlds, via the usual spinarounds. It was my first voyage and I was in command. I thought for a long time that I would lose my soul on that voyage; but now I know that what was happening aboard that ship was not the losing of a soul but the gaining of one. And perhaps of more than one.

2.

Roacher thought I was sweet. I could have killed him for that; but of course he was dead already.

You have to give up your life when you go to heaven. What you get in return is for me to know and you, if you care, to find out; but the inescapable thing is that you leave behind anything that ever linked you to life on shore, and you become something else. We say that you give up the body and you get your soul. Certainly you can keep your body too, if you want it. Most do. But it isn't any good to you any more, not in the ways that you think a body is good to you. I mean to tell you how it was for me on my first voyage aboard the *Sword of Orion,* so many years ago.

I was the youngest officer on board, so naturally I was captain.

They put you in command right at the start, before you're anyone. That's the only test that means a damn: they throw you in the sea and if you can swim you don't drown, and if you can't you do. The drowned ones go back in the tank and they serve their own useful purposes, as push-cells or downloaders or mind-wipers or Johnny-scrub-and-scour or whatever. The ones that don't drown go on to other commands. No one is wasted. The Age of Waste has been over a long time.

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On the third virtual day out from Kansas Four, Roacher told me that I was the sweetest captain he had ever served under. And he had served under plenty of them, for Roacher had gone up to heaven at least two hundred years before, maybe more.

"I can see it in your eyes, the sweetness. I can see it in the angle you hold your head."

He didn't mean it as a compliment.

"We can put you off ship at Ultima Thule," Roacher said. "Nobody will hold it against you. We'll put you in a bottle and send you down, and the Thuleys will catch you and decant you and you'll be able to find your way back to Kansas Four in twenty or fifty years. It might be the best thing."

Roacher is small and parched, with brown skin and eyes that shine with the purple luminescence of space. Some of the worlds he has seen were forgotten a thousand years ago.

"Go bottle yourself, Roacher," I told him.

"Ah, Captain, Captain! Don't take it the wrong way. Here, Captain, give us a touch of the sweetness." He reached out a claw, trying to stroke me along the side of my face. "Give us a touch, Captain, give us just a little touch!"

"I'll fry your soul and have it for breakfast, Roacher. There's sweetness for you. Go scuttle off, will you? Go jack yourself to the mast and drink hydrogen, Roacher. Go. Go."

"So sweet," he said. But he went. I had the power to hurt him. He knew I could do it, because I was captain. He also knew I wouldn't; but there was always the possibility he was wrong. The captain exists in that margin between certainty and possibility. A crewman tests the width of that margin at his own risk. Roacher knew that. He had been a captain once himself, after all.

There were seventeen of us to heaven that voyage, staffing a ten-kilo Megaspore-class ship with full annexes and extensions and all virtualities. We carried a bulging cargo of the things regarded in those days as vital in the distant colonies: pre-read vapor chips, artificial intelligences, climate nodes, matrix jacks, mediq machines, bone banks, soil converters, transit spheres, communication bubbles, skin-and-organ synthesizers, wildlife domestication plaques, gene replacement kits, a sealed consignment of obliteration sand and other proscribed weapons, and so on. We also had fifty billion dollars in the form of liquid currency pods, central-bank-to-central-bank transmission. In addition there was a passenger load of seven thousand colonists. Eight hundred of these were on the hoof and the others were stored in matrix form for body transplant on the worlds of destination. A standard load, in other words. The crew worked on commission, also as per standard, one percent of bill-of-lading value

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divided in customary lays. Mine was the fiftieth lay—that is, two percent of the net profits of the voyage—and that included a bonus for serving as captain; otherwise I would have had the hundredth lay or something even longer. Roacher had the tenth lay and his jackmate Bulgar the fourteenth, although they weren't even officers. Which demonstrates the value of seniority in the Service. But seniority is the same thing as survival, after all, and why should survival not be rewarded? On my most recent voyage I draw the nineteenth lay. I will have better than that on my next.

3.

You have never seen a starship. We keep only to heaven; when we are to worldward, shoreships come out to us for the downloading. The closest we ever go to planetskin is a million shiplengths. Any closer and we'd be shaken apart by that terrible strength which emanates from worlds.

We don't miss landcrawling, though. It's a plague to us. If I had to step to shore now, after having spent most of my lifetime in heaven, I would die of the drop-death within an hour. That is a monstrous way to die; but why would I ever go ashore? The likelihood of that still existed for me at the time I first sailed the *Sword of Orion,* you understand, but I have long since given it up. That is what I mean when I say that you give up your life when you go to heaven. But of course what also goes from you is any feeling that to be ashore has anything to do with being alive. If you could ride a starship, or even see one as we see them, you would understand. I don't blame you for being what you are.

Let me show you the *Sword of Orion.* Though you will never see it as we see it.

What would you see, if you left the ship as we sometimes do to do the starwalk in the Great Open?

The first thing you would see was the light of the ship. A starship gives off a tremendous insistent glow of light that splits heaven like the blast of a trumpet. That great light both precedes and follows. Ahead of the ship rides a luminescent cone of brightness bellowing in the void. In its wake the ship leaves a photonic track so intense that it could be gathered up and weighed. It is the stardrive that issues this light: a ship eats space, and light is its offthrow.

Within the light you would see a needle ten kilometers long. That is the ship. One end tapers to a sharp point and the other has the Eye, and it is several days' journey by foot from end to end through all the compartments that lie between. It is a world self-contained. The needle is a flattened one. You could walk about easily on the outer surface of the

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ship, the skin of the top deck, what we call Skin Deck. Or just as easily on Belly Deck, the one on the bottom side. We call one the top deck and the other the bottom, but when you are outside the ship these distinctions have no meaning. Between Skin and Belly lie Crew Deck, Passenger Deck, Cargo Deck, Drive Deck. Ordinarily no one goes from one deck to another. We stay where we belong. The engines are in the Eye. So are the captain's quarters.

That needle is the ship, but it is not the whole ship. What you will not be able to see are the annexes and extensions and virtualities. These accompany the ship, enfolding it in a webwork of intricate outstructures. But they are of a subordinate level of reality and therefore they defy vision. A ship tunnels into the void, spreading far and wide to find room for all that it must carry. In these outlying zones are kept our supplies and provisions, our stores of fuel, and all cargo traveling at second-class rates. If the ship transports prisoners, they will ride in an annex. If the ship expects to encounter severe probability turbulence during the course of the voyage, it will arm itself with stabilizers, and those will be carried in the virtualities, ready to be brought into being if needed. These are the mysteries of our profession. Take them on faith, or ignore them, as you will: they are not meant for you to know.

A ship takes forty years to build. There are two hundred seventy-one of them in service now. New ones are constantly under construction. They are the only link binding the Mother Worlds and the eight hundred ninety-eight Colonies and the colonies of the Colonies. Four ships have been lost since the beginning of the Service. No one knows why. The loss of a starship is the worst disaster I can imagine. The last such event occurred sixty virtual years ago.

A starship never returns to the world from which it was launched. The galaxy is too large for that. It makes its voyage and it continues onward through heaven in an endless open circuit. That is the service of the Service. There would be no point in returning, since thousands of world-ward years sweep by behind us as we make our voyages. We live outside of time. We must, for there is no other way. That is our burden and our privilege. That is the service of the Service.

4.

On the fifth virtual day of the voyage I suddenly felt a tic, a nibble, a subtle indication that something had gone wrong. It was a very trifling thing, barely perceptible, like the scatter of eroded pebbles that tells you that the palace and towers of a great ruined city lie buried beneath the mound on which you climb. Unless you are looking for such signals you

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will not see them. But I was primed for discovery that day. I was eager for it. A strange kind of joy came over me when I picked up that fleeting signal of wrongness.

I keyed the intelligence on duty and said, "What was that tremor on Passenger Deck?"

The intelligence arrived instantly in my mind, a sharp gray-green presence with a halo of tingling music.

"I am aware of no tremor, sir."

"There was a distinct tremor. There was a data-spurt just now."

"Indeed, sir? A data-spurt, sir?" The intelligence sounded aghast, but in a condescending way. It was humoring me. "What action shall I take, sir?"

I was being invited to retreat.

The intelligence on duty was a 49 Henry Henry. The Henry series affects a sort of slippery innocence that I find disingenuous. Still, they are very capable intelligences. I wondered if I had misread the signal. Perhaps I was too eager for an event, any event, that would confirm my relationship with the ship.

There is never a sense of motion or activity aboard a starship: we float in silence on a tide of darkness, cloaked in our own dazzling light. Nothing moves, nothing seems to live in all the universe. Since we had left Kansas Four I had felt that great silence judging me. Was I really captain of this vessel? Good: then let me feel the weight of duty upon my shoulders.

We were past Ultima Thule by this time, and there could be no turning back. Borne on our cloak of light, we would roar through heaven for week after virtual week until we came to worldward at the first of our destinations, which was Cul-de-Sac in the Vainglory Archipelago, out by the Spook Clusters. Here in free space I must begin to master the ship, or it would master me.

"Sir?" the intelligence said.

"Run a data uptake," I ordered. "All Passenger Deck input for the past half hour. There was movement. There was a spurt."

I knew I might be wrong. Still, to err on the side of caution may be naïve, but it isn't a sin. And I knew that at this stage in the voyage nothing I could say or do would make me seem other than naïve to the crew of the *Sword of Orion*. What did I have to lose by ordering a recheck, then? I was hungry for surprises. Any irregularity that 49 Henry Henry turned up would be to my advantage; the absence of one would make nothing worse for me.

"Begging your pardon, sir," 49 Henry Henry reported after a moment, "but there was no tremor, sir."

"Maybe I overstated it, then. Calling it a tremor. Maybe it was just an anomaly. What do you say, 49 Henry Henry?" I wondered if I was

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humiliating myself, negotiating like this with an intelligence. "There was something. I'm sure of that. An unmistakable irregular burst in the data-flow. An anomaly, yes. What do you say, 49 Henry Henry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes what?"

"The record does show an irregularity, sir. Your observation was quite acute, sir."

"Go on."

"No cause for alarm, sir. A minor metabolic movement, nothing more. Like turning over in your sleep." You bastard, what do you know about sleep? "Extremely unusual, sir, that you should be able to observe anything so small. I commend you, sir. The passengers are all well, sir."

"Very good," I said. "Enter this exchange in the log, 49 Henry Henry."

"Already entered, sir," the intelligence said. "Permission to decouple, sir?"

"Yes, you can decouple," I told it.

The shimmer of music that signaled its presence grew tinny and was gone: I could imagine it smirking as it went about its ghostly flitting rounds deep in the neural conduits of the ship. Scornful software, glowing with contempt for its putative master. The poor captain, it was thinking. The poor hopeless silly boy of a captain. A passenger sneezes and he's ready to seal all bulkheads.

Well, let it smirk, I thought. I have acted appropriately and the record will show it.

I knew that all this was part of my testing.

You may think that to be captain of such a ship as the *Sword of Orion* in your first voyage to heaven is an awesome responsibility and an inconceivable burden. So it is, but not for the reason you think.

In truth the captain's duties are the least significant of anyone's aboard the ship. The others have well-defined tasks that are essential to the smooth running of the voyage, although the ship could, if the need arose, generate virtual replacements for any and every crew member and function adequately on its own. The captain's task, though, is fundamentally abstract. His role is to witness the voyage, to embody it in his own consciousness, to give it coherence, continuity, by reducing it to a pattern of decisions and responses. In that sense the captain is simply so much software: he is the coding through which the voyage is expressed as a series of linear functions. If he fails to perform that duty adequately, others will quietly see to it that the voyage proceeds as it should. What is destroyed, in the course of a voyage that is inadequately captained, is the captain himself, not the voyage. My pre-flight training made that absolutely clear. The voyage can survive the most feeble of captains. As I have said, four starships have been lost since the Service began, and

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no one knows why. But there is no reason to think that any of those catastrophes were caused by failings of the captain. How could they have been? The captain is only the vehicle through which others act. It is not the captain who makes the voyage, but the voyage which makes the captain.

5.

Restless, troubled, I wandered the Eye of the ship. Despite 49 Henry Henry's suave mockery I was still convinced there was trouble on board, or about to be.

Just as I reached Outerscreen Level I felt something strange touch me a second time. It was different this time, and deeply disturbing.

The Eye, as it makes the complete descent from Skin Deck to Belly Deck, is lined with screens that provide displays, actual or virtual, of all aspects of the ship both internal and external. I came up to the great black bevel-edged screen that provided our simulated view of the external realspace environment and was staring at the dwindling wheel of the Ultima Thule relay point when the new anomaly occurred. The other had been the merest of subliminal signals, a nip, a tickle. This was more like an attempted intrusion. Invisible fingers seemed to brush lightly over my brain, probing, seeking entrance. The fingers withdrew; a moment later there was a sudden stabbing pain in my left temple.

I stiffened. "Who's there?"

"Help me," a silent voice said.

I had heard wild tales of passenger matrixes breaking free of their storage circuits and drifting through the ship like ghosts, looking for an unguarded body that they might infiltrate. The sources were unreliable, old scoundrels like Roacher or Bulgar. I dismissed such stories as fables, the way I dismissed what I had heard of the vast tentacular krakens that were said to swim the seas of space, or the beckoning mermaids with shining breasts who danced along the force-lines at spinaround points. But I had felt this. The probing fingers, the sudden sharp pain. And the sense of someone frightened, frightened but strong, stronger than I, hovering close at hand.

"Where are you?"

There was no reply. Whatever it was, if it had been anything at all, had slipped back into hiding after that one furtive thrust.

But was it really gone?

"You're still here somewhere," I said. "I know that you are."

Silence. Stillness.

"You asked for help. Why did you disappear so fast?"

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No response. I felt anger rising.

"Whoever you are. Whatever. Speak up."

Nothing. Silence. Had I imagined it? The probing, the voiceless voice?

No. No. I was certain that there was something invisible and unreal hovering about me. And I found it infuriating, not to be able to regain contact with it. To be toyed with this way, to be mocked like this.

This is my ship, I thought. I want no ghosts aboard my ship.

"You can be detected," I said. "You can be contained. You can be eradicated."

As I stood there blustering in my frustration, it seemed to me that I felt that touch against my mind again, a lighter one this time, wistful, regretful. Perhaps I invented it. Perhaps I have supplied it retroactively.

But it lasted only a part of an instant, if it happened at all, and then I was unquestionably alone again. The solitude was real and total and unmistakable. I stood gripping the rail of the screen, leaning forward into the brilliant blackness and swaying dizzily as if I were being pulled forward through the wall of the ship into space.

"Captain?"

The voice of 49 Henry Henry, tumbling out of the air behind me.

"Did you feel something that time?" I asked.

The intelligence ignored my question. "Captain, there's trouble on Passenger Deck. Hands-on alarm: will you come?"

"Set up a transit track for me," I said. "I'm on my way."

Lights began to glow in mid-air, yellow, blue, green. The interior of the ship is a vast opaque maze and moving about within it is difficult without an intelligence to guide you. 49 Henry Henry constructed an efficient route for me down the curve of the Eye and into the main body of the ship, and thence around the rim of the leeward wall to the elevator down to Passenger Deck. I rode an air-cushion tracker keyed to the lights. The journey took no more than fifteen minutes. Unaided I might have needed a week.

Passenger Deck is an echoing nest of coffins, hundreds of them, sometimes even thousands, arranged in rows three abreast. Here our live cargo sleeps until we arrive and decant the stored sleepers into wakefulness. Machinery sighs and murmurs all around them, coddling them in their suspension. Beyond, far off in the dim distance, is the place for passengers of a different sort—a spiderwebbing of sensory cables that holds our thousands of disembodied matrixes. Those are the colonists who have left their bodies behind when going into space. It is a dark and forbidding place, dimly lit by swirling velvet comets that circle overhead emitting sparks of red and green.

The trouble was in the suspension area. Five crewmen were there already, the oldest hands on board: Katkat, Dismas, Rio de Rio, Gavotte,

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Roacher. Seeing them all together, I knew this must be some major event. We move on distant orbits within the immensity of the ship: to see as many as three members of the crew in the same virtual month is extraordinary. Now here were five. I felt an oppressive sense of community among them. Each of these five had sailed the seas of heaven more years than I had been alive. For at least a dozen voyages now they had been together as a team. I was the stranger in their midst, unknown, untried, lightly regarded, insignificant. Already Roacher had indicted me for my sweetness, by which he meant, I knew, a basic incapacity to act decisively. I thought he was wrong. But perhaps he knew me better than I knew myself.

They stepped back, opening a path between them. Gavotte, a great hulking thick-shouldered man with a surprisingly delicate and precise way of conducting himself, gestured with open hands: Here, Captain, see? See?

What I saw were coils of greenish smoke coming up from a passenger housing, and the glass door of the housing half open, cracked from top to bottom, frosted by temperature differentials. I could hear a sullen dripping sound. Blue fluid fell in thick steady gouts from a shattered support line. Within the housing itself was the pale naked figure of a man, eyes wide open, mouth agape as if in a silent scream. His left arm was raised, his fist was clenched. He looked like an anguished statue.

They had body-salvage equipment standing by. The hapless passenger would be disassembled and all usable parts stored as soon as I gave the word.

"Is he irretrievable?" I asked.

"Take a look," Katkat said, pointing to the housing readout. All the curves pointed down. "We have nineteen percent degradation already, and rising. Do we disassemble?"

"Go ahead," I said. "Approved."

The lasers glinted and flailed. Body parts came into view, shining, moist. The coiling metallic arms of the body-salvage equipment rose and fell, lifting organs that were not yet beyond repair and putting them into storage. As the machine labored the men worked around it, shutting down the broken housing, tying off the disrupted feeders and refrigerator cables.

I asked Dismas what had happened. He was the mind-wiper for this sector, responsible for maintenance on the suspended passengers. His face was open and easy, but the deceptive cheeriness about his mouth and cheeks was mysteriously negated by his bleak, shadowy eyes. He told me that he had been working much farther down the deck, performing routine service on the Strappado-bound people, when he felt a sudden small disturbance, a quick tickle of wrongness.

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"So did I," I said. "How long ago was that?"

"Half an hour, maybe. I didn't make a special note of it. I thought it was something in my gut, Captain. You felt it too, you say?"

I nodded. "Just a tickle. It's in the record." I heard the distant music of 49 Henry Henry. Perhaps the intelligence was trying to apologize for doubting me. "What happened next?" I asked.

"Went back to work. Five, ten minutes, maybe. Felt another jolt, a stronger one." He touched his forehead, right at the temple, showing me where. "Detectors went off, broken glass. Came running, found this Cul-de-Sac passenger here undergoing convulsions. Rising from his bindings, thrashing around. Pulled himself loose from everything, went smack against the housing window. Broke it. It's a very fast death."

"Matrix intrusion," Roacher said.

The skin of my scalp tightened. I turned to him.

"Tell me about that."

He shrugged. "Once in a long while someone in the storage circuits gets to feeling footloose, and finds a way out and goes roaming the ship. Looking for a body to jack into, that's what they're doing. Jack into me, jack into Katkat, even jack into you, Captain. Anybody handy, just so they can feel flesh around them again. Jacked into this one here and something went wrong."

The probing fingers, yes. The silent voice. *Help me.*

"I never heard of anyone jacking into a passenger in suspension," Dismas said.

"No reason why not," said Roacher.

"What's the good? Still stuck in a housing, you are. Frozen down, that's no better than staying matrix."

"Five to two it was matrix intrusion," Roacher said, glaring.

"Done," Dismas said. Gavotte laughed and came in on the bet. So too did sinuous little Katkat, taking the other side. Rio de Rio, who had not spoken a word to anyone in his last six voyages, snorted and gestured obscenely at both factions.

I felt like an idle spectator. To regain some illusion of command I said, "If there's a matrix loose, it'll show up on ship inventory. Dismas, check with the intelligence on duty and report to me. Katkat, Gavotte, finish cleaning up this mess and seal everything off. Then I want your reports in the log and a copy to me. I'll be in my quarters. There'll be further instructions later. The missing matrix, if that's what we have on our hands, will be identified, located, and recaptured."

Roacher grinned at me. I thought he was going to lead a round of cheers.

I turned and mounted my tracker, and rode it following the lights,

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yellow, blue, green, back up through the maze of decks and out to the Eye.

As I entered my cabin something touched my mind and a silent voice said, "Please help me."

6.

Carefully I shut the door behind me, locked it, loaded the privacy screens. The captain's cabin aboard a Megaspore starship of the Service is a world in itself, serene, private, immense. In mine, spiral galaxies whirled and sparkled on the walls. I had a stream, a lake, a silver waterfall beyond it. The air was soft and glistening. At a touch of my hand I could have light, music, scent, color, from any one of a thousand hidden orifices. Or I could turn the walls translucent and let the luminous splendor of starspace come flooding through.

Only when I was fully settled in, protected and insulated and comfortable, did I say, "All right. What are you?"

"You promise you won't report me to the captain?"

"I don't promise anything."

"You will help me, though?" The voice seemed at once frightened and insistent, urgent and vulnerable.

"How can I say? You give me nothing to work with."

"I'll tell you everything. But first you have to promise not to call the captain."

I debated with myself for a moment and opted for directness.

"I am the captain," I said.

"No!"

"Can you see this room? What do you think it is? Crew quarters? The scullery?"

I felt turbulent waves of fear coming from my invisible companion. And then nothing. Was it gone? Then I had made a mistake in being so forthright. This phantom had to be confined, sealed away, perhaps destroyed, before it could do more damage. I should have been more devious. And also I knew that I would regret it in another way if it had slipped away: I was taking a certain pleasure in being able to speak with someone—something—that was neither a member of my crew nor an omnipotent, contemptuous artificial intelligence.

"Are you still here?" I asked after a while.

Silence.

Gone, I thought. Sweeping through the *Sword of Orion* like a gale of wind. Probably down at the far end of the ship by this time.

Then, as if there had been no break in the conversation: "I just can't

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believe it. Of all the places I could have gone, I had to walk right into the captain's cabin."

"So it seems."

"And you're actually the captain?"

"Yes. Actually."

Another pause.

"You seem so young," it said. "For a captain."

"Be careful," I told it.

"I didn't mean anything by that, Captain." With a touch of bravado, even defiance, mingling with uncertainty and anxiety. "Captain *sir*."

Looking toward the ceiling, where shining resonator nodes shimmered all up and down the spectrum as slave-light leaped from junction to junction along the illuminator strands, I searched for a glimpse of it, some minute electromagnetic clue. But there was nothing.

I imagined a web of impalpable force, a dancing will-o'-the-wisp, flitting erratically about the room, now perching on my shoulder, now clinging to some fixture, now extending itself to fill every open space: an airy thing, a sprite, playful and capricious. Curiously, not only was I unafraid but I found myself strongly drawn to it. There was something strangely appealing about this quick vibrating spirit, so bright with contradictions. And yet it had caused the death of one of my passengers.

"Well?" I said. "You're safe here. But when are you going to tell me what you are?"

"Isn't that obvious? I'm a matrix."

"Go on."

"A free matrix, a matrix on the loose. A matrix who's in big trouble. I think I've hurt someone. Maybe killed him."

"One of the passengers?" I said.

"So you know?"

"There's a dead passenger, yes. We're not sure what happened."

"It wasn't my fault. It was an accident."

"That may be," I said. "Tell me about it. Tell me everything."

"Can I trust you?"

"More than anyone else on this ship."

"But you're the captain."

"That's why," I said.

7.

Her name was Leeleaine, but she wanted me to call her Vox. That means "voice," she said, in one of the ancient languages of Earth. She was seventeen years old, from Jaana Head, which is an island off the

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coast of West Palabar on Kansas Four. Her father was a glass-farmer, her mother operated a gravity hole, and she had five brothers and three sisters, all of them much older than she was.

"Do you know what that's like, Captain? Being the youngest of nine? And both your parents working all the time, and your cross-parents just as busy? Can you imagine? And growing up on Kansas Four, where it's a thousand kilometers between cities, and you aren't even in a city, you're on an *island*?"

"I know something of what that's like," I said.

"Are you from Kansas Four too?"

"No," I said. "Not from Kansas Four. But a place much like it, I think."

She spoke of a troubled, unruly childhood, full of loneliness and anger. Kansas Four, I have heard, is a beautiful world, if you are inclined to find beauty in worlds: a wild and splendid place, where the sky is scarlet and the bare basalt mountains rise in the east like a magnificent black wall. But to hear Vox speak of it, it was squalid, grim, bleak. For her it was a loveless place where she led a loveless life. And yet she told me of pale violet seas aglow with brilliant yellow fish, and trees that erupted with a shower of dazzling crimson fronds when they were in bloom, and warm rains that sang in the air like harps. I was not then so long in heaven that I had forgotten the beauty of seas or trees or rains, which by now are nothing but hollow words to me. Yet Vox had found her life on Kansas Four so hateful that she had been willing to abandon not only her native world but her body itself.

That was a point of kinship between us: I too had given up my world and my former life, if not my actual flesh. But I had chosen heaven, and the Service. Vox had volunteered to exchange one landcrawling servitude for another.

"The day came," she said, "when I knew I couldn't stand it any more. I was so miserable, so empty: I thought about having to live this way for another two hundred years or even more, and I wanted to pick up the hills and throw them at each other. Or get into my mother's plummeter and take it straight to the bottom of the sea. I made a list of ways I could kill myself. But I knew I couldn't do it, not this way or that way or any way. I wanted to live. But I didn't want to live like *that*."

On that same day, she said, the soul-call from Cul-de-Sac reached Kansas Four. A thousand vacant bodies were available there and they wanted soul-matrixes to fill them. Without a moment's hesitation Vox put her name on the list.

There is a constant migration of souls between the worlds. On each of my voyages I have carried thousands of them, setting forth hopefully toward new bodies on strange planets.

Every world has a stock of bodies awaiting replacement souls. Most

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were the victims of sudden violence. Life is risky on shore, and death lurks everywhere. Salvaging and repairing a body is no troublesome matter, but once a soul has fled it can never be recovered. So the empty bodies of those who drown and those who are stung by lethal insects and those who are thrown from vehicles and those who are struck by falling branches as they work are collected and examined. If they are beyond repair they are disassembled and their usable parts set aside to be installed in others. But if their bodies can be made whole again, they are, and they are placed in holding chambers until new souls become available for them.

And then there are those who vacate their bodies voluntarily, perhaps because they are weary of them, or weary of their worlds, and wish to move along. They are the ones who sign up to fill the waiting bodies on far worlds, while others come behind them to fill the bodies they have abandoned. The least costly way to travel between the worlds is to surrender your body and go in matrix form, thus exchanging a discouraging life for an unfamiliar one. That was what Vox had done. In pain and despair she had agreed to allow the essence of herself, everything she had ever seen or felt or thought or dreamed, to be converted into a lattice of electrical impulses that the *Sword of Orion* would carry on its voyage from Kansas Four to Cul-de-Sac. A new body lay reserved for her there. Her own discarded body would remain in suspension on Kansas Four. Some day it might become the home of some wandering soul from another world; or, if there were no bids for it, it might eventually be disassembled by the body-salvagers, and its parts put to some worthy use. Vox would never know; Vox would never care.

"I can understand trading an unhappy life for a chance at a happy one," I said. "But why break loose on ship? What purpose could that serve? Why not wait until you got to Cul-de-Sac?"

"Because it was torture," she said.

"Torture? What was?"

"Living as a matrix." She laughed bitterly. "Living? It's worse than death could ever be!"

"Tell me."

"You've never done matrix, have you?"

"No," I said. "I chose another way to escape."

"Then you don't know. You can't know. You've got a ship full of matrixes in storage circuits but you don't understand a thing about them. Imagine that the back of your neck itches, Captain. But you have no arms to scratch with. Your thigh starts to itch. Your chest. You lie there itching everywhere. And you can't scratch. Do you understand me?"

"How can a matrix feel an itch? A matrix is simply a pattern of electrical—"

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"Oh, you're impossible! You're *stupid!* I'm not talking about actual literal itching. I'm giving you a suppose, a for-instance. Because you'd never be able to understand the real situation. Look: you're in the storage circuit. All you are is electricity. That's all a mind really is, anyway: electricity. But you used to have a body. The body had sensation. The body had feelings. You remember them. You're a prisoner. A prisoner remembers all sorts of things that used to be taken for granted. You'd give anything to feel the wind in your hair again, or the taste of cool milk, or the scent of flowers. Or even the pain of a cut finger. The saltiness of your blood when you lick the cut. Anything. I hated my body, don't you see? I couldn't wait to be rid of it. But once it was gone I missed the feelings it had. I missed the sense of flesh pulling at me, holding me to the ground, flesh full of nerves, flesh that could feel pleasure. Or pain."

"I understand," I said, and I think that I truly did. "But the voyage to Cul-de-Sac is short. A few virtual weeks and you'd be there, and out of storage and into your new body, and—"

"Weeks? Think of that itch on the back of your neck, Captain. The itch that you can't scratch. How long do you think you could stand it, lying there feeling that itch? Five minutes? An hour? *Weeks?*"

It seemed to me that an itch left unscratched would die of its own, perhaps in minutes. But that was only how it seemed to me. I was not Vox; I had not been a matrix in a storage circuit.

I said, "So you let yourself out? How?"

"It wasn't that hard to figure. I had nothing else to do but think about it. You align yourself with the polarity of the circuit. That's a matrix too, an electrical pattern holding you in crosswise bands. You change the alignment. It's like being tied up, and slipping the ropes around until you can slide free. And then you can go anywhere you like. You key into any bioprocessor aboard the ship and you draw your energy from that instead of from the storage circuit, and it sustains you. I can move anywhere around this ship at the speed of light. Anywhere. In just the time you blinked your eye, I've been everywhere. I've been to the far tip and out on the mast, and I've been down through the lower decks, and I've been in the crew quarters and the cargo places and I've even been a little way off into something that's right outside the ship but isn't quite real, if you know what I mean. Something that just seems to be a cradle of probability waves surrounding us. It's like being a ghost. But it doesn't solve anything. Do you see? The torture still goes on. You want to feel, but you can't. You want to be connected again, your senses, your inputs. That's why I tried to get into the passenger, do you see? But he wouldn't let me."

I began to understand at last.

Not everyone who goes to the worlds of heaven as a colonist travels

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in matrix form. Ordinarily anyone who can afford to take his body with him will do so; but relatively few can afford it. Those who do travel in suspension, the deepest of sleeps. We carry no waking passengers in the Service, not at any price. They would be trouble for us, poking here, poking there, asking questions, demanding to be served and pampered. They would shatter the peace of the voyage. And so they go down into their coffins, their housings, and there they sleep the voyage away, all life-processes halted, a death-in-life that will not be reversed until we bring them to their destinations.

And poor Vox, freed of her prisoning circuit and hungry for sensory data, had tried to slip herself into a passenger's body.

I listened, appalled and somber, as she told of her terrible odyssey through the ship. Breaking free of the circuit: that had been the first strangeness I felt, that tic, that nibble at the threshold of my consciousness.

Her first wild moment of freedom had been exhilarating and joyous. But then had come the realization that nothing really had changed. She was at large, but still she was incorporeal, caught in that monstrous frustration of bodilessness, yearning for a touch. Perhaps such torment was common among matrixes; perhaps that was why, now and then, they broke free as Vox had done, to roam ships like sad troubled spirits. So Roacher had said. *Once in a long while someone in the storage circuits gets to feeling footloose, and finds a way out and goes roaming the ship. Looking for a body to jack into, that's what they're doing. Jack into me, jack into Katkat, even jack into you, Captain. Anybody handy, just so they can feel flesh around them again.* Yes.

That was the second jolt, the stronger one, that Dismas and I had felt, when Vox, selecting a passenger at random, suddenly, impulsively, had slipped herself inside his brain. She had realized her mistake at once. The passenger, lost in whatever dreams may come to the suspended, reacted to her intrusion with wild terror. Convulsions swept him; he rose, clawing at the equipment that sustained his life, trying desperately to evict the succubus that had penetrated him. In this frantic struggle he smashed the case of his housing and died. Vox, fleeing, frightened, careened about the ship in search of refuge, encountered me standing by the screen in the Eye, and made an abortive attempt to enter my mind. But just then the death of the passenger registered on 49 Henry Henry's sensors and when the intelligence made contact with me to tell me of the emergency Vox fled again, and hovered dolefully until I returned to my cabin. She had not meant to kill the passenger, she said. She was sorry that he had died. She felt some embarrassment, now, and fear. But no guilt. She rejected guilt for it almost defiantly. He had died? Well, so he had died. That was too bad. But how could she have known any such

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thing was going to happen? She was only looking for a body to take refuge in. Hearing that from her, I had a sense of her as someone utterly unlike me, someone volatile, unstable, perhaps violent. And yet I felt a strange kinship with her, even an identity. As though we were two parts of the same spirit; as though she and I were one and the same. I barely understood why.

"And what now?" I asked. "You say you want help. How?"

"Take me in."

"What?"

"Hide me. In you. If they find me, they'll eradicate me. You said so yourself, that it could be done, that I could be detected, contained, eradicated. But it won't happen if you protect me."

"I'm the *captain,*" I said, astounded.

"Yes."

"How can I—"

"They'll all be looking for me. The intelligences, the crewmen. It scares them, knowing there's a matrix loose. They'll want to destroy me. But if they can't find me, they'll start to forget about me after a while. They'll think I've escaped into space, or something. And if I'm jacked into you, nobody's going to be able to find me."

"I have a responsibility to—"

"Please," she said. "I could go to one of the others, maybe. But I feel closest to you. Please. Please."

"Closest to me?"

"You aren't happy. You don't belong. Not here, not anywhere. You don't fit in, any more than I did on Kansas Four. I could feel it the moment I first touched your mind. You're a new captain, right? And the others on board are making it hard for you. Why should you care about *them?* Save me. We have more in common than you do with them. Please? You can't just let them eradicate me. I'm young. I didn't mean to hurt anyone. All I want is to get to Cul-de-Sac and be put in the body that's waiting for me there. A new start, my first start, really. Will you?"

"Why do you bother asking permission? You can simply enter me through my jack whenever you want, can't you?"

"The last one died," she said.

"He was in suspension. You didn't kill him by entering him. It was the surprise, the fright. He killed himself by thrashing around and wrecking his housing."

"Even so," said Vox. "I wouldn't try that again, an unwilling host. You have to say you'll let me, or I won't come in."

I was silent.

"Help me?" she said.

"Come," I told her.

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8.

It was just like any other jacking: an electrochemical mind-to-mind bond, a linkage by way of the implant socket at the base of my spine. The sort of thing that any two people who wanted to make communion might do. There was just one difference, which was that we didn't use a jack. We skipped the whole intricate business of checking bandwidths and voltages and selecting the right transformer-adapter. She could do it all, simply by matching evoked potentials. I felt a momentary sharp sensation and then she was with me.

"Breathe," she said. "Breathe real deep. Fill your lungs. Rub your hands together. Touch your cheeks. Scratch behind your left ear. Please. Please. It's been so long for me since I've *felt* anything."

Her voice sounded the same as before, both real and unreal. There was no substance to it, no density of timbre, no sense that it was produced by the vibrations of vocal cords atop a column of air. Yet it was clear, firm, substantial in some essential way, a true voice in all respects except that there was no speaker to utter it. I suppose that while she was outside me she had needed to extend some strand of herself into my neural system in order to generate it. Now that was unnecessary. But I still perceived the voice as originating outside me, even though she had taken up residence within.

She overflowed with needs.

"Take a drink of water," she urged. "Eat something. Can you make your knuckles crack? Do it, oh, do it! Put your hand between your legs and squeeze. There's so much I want to feel. Do you have music here? Give me some music, will you? Something loud, something really hard."

I did the things she wanted. Gradually she grew more calm.

I was strangely calm myself. I had no special awareness then of her presence within me, no unfamiliar pressure in my skull, no slitherings along my spine. There was no mingling of her thought-stream and mine. She seemed not to have any way of controlling the movements or responses of my body. In these respects our contact was less intimate than any ordinary human jacking communion would have been. But that, I would soon discover, was by her choice. We would not remain so carefully compartmentalized for long.

"Is it better for you now?" I asked.

"I thought I was going to go crazy. If I didn't start feeling something again soon."

"You can feel things now?"

"Through you, yes. Whatever you touch, I touch."

"You know I can't hide you for long. They'll take my command away if I'm caught harboring a fugitive. Or worse."

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"You don't have to speak out loud to me any more," she said.

"I don't understand."

"Just *send* it. We have the same nervous system now."

"You can read my thoughts?" I said, still aloud.

"Not really. I'm not hooked into the higher cerebral centers. But I pick up motor, sensory stuff. And I get subvocalizations. You know what those are? I can hear your thoughts if you want me to. It's like being in communion. You've been in communion, haven't you?"

"Once in a while."

"Then you know. Just open the channel to me. You can't go around the ship talking out loud to somebody invisible, you know. *Send* me something. It isn't hard."

"Like this?" I said, visualizing a packet of verbal information sliding through the channels of my mind.

"You see? You can do it!"

"Even so," I told her. "You still can't stay like this with me for long. You have to realize that."

She laughed. It was unmistakable, a silent but definite laugh. "You sound so serious. I bet you're still surprised you took me in in the first place."

"I certainly am. Did you think I would?"

"Sure I did. From the first moment. You're basically a very kind person."

"Am I, Vox?"

"Of course. You just have to let yourself do it." Again the silent laughter. "I don't even know your name. Here I am right inside your head and I don't know your name."

"Adam."

"That's a nice name. Is that an Earth name?"

"An old Earth name, yes. Very old."

"And are you from Earth?" she asked.

"No. Except in the sense that we're all from Earth."

"Where, then?"

"I'd just as soon not talk about it," I said.

She thought about that. "You hated the place where you grew up that much?"

"Please, Vox—"

"Of course you hated it. Just like I hated Kansas Four. We're two of a kind, you and me. We're one and the same. You got all the caution and I got all the impulsiveness. But otherwise we're the same person. That's why we share so well. I'm glad I'm sharing with you, Adam. You won't make me leave, will you? We belong with each other. You'll let me stay until we reach Cul-de-Sac. I know you will."

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"Maybe. Maybe not." I wasn't at all sure, either way.

"Oh, you will. You will, Adam. I know you better than you know yourself."

9.

So it began. I was in some new realm outside my established sense of myself, so far beyond my notions of appropriate behavior that I could not even feel astonishment at what I had done. I had taken her in, that was all. A stranger in my skull. She had turned to me in appeal and I had taken her in. It was as if her recklessness was contagious. And though I didn't mean to shelter her any longer than was absolutely necessary, I could already see that I wasn't going to make any move to eject her until her safety was assured.

But how was I going to hide her?

Invisible she might be, but not undetectable. And everyone on the ship would be searching for her.

There were sixteen crewmen on board who dreaded a loose matrix as they would a vampire. They would seek her as long as she remained at large. And not only the crew. The intelligences would be monitoring for her too, not out of any kind of fear but simply out of efficiency: they had nothing to fear from Vox but they would want the cargo manifests to come out in balance when we reached our destination.

The crew didn't trust me in the first place. I was too young, too new, too green, too *sweet*. I was just the sort who might be guilty of giving shelter to a secret fugitive. And it was altogether likely that her presence within me would be obvious to others in some way not apparent to me. As for the intelligences, they had access to all sorts of data as part of their routine maintenance operations. Perhaps they could measure tiny physiological changes, differences in my reaction times or circulatory efficiency or whatever, that would be a tipoff to the truth. How would I know? I would have to be on constant guard against discovery of the secret sharer of my consciousness.

The first test came less than an hour after Vox had entered me. The communicator light went on and I heard the far-off music of the intelligence on duty.

This one was 612 Jason, working the late shift. Its aura was golden, its music deep and throbbing. Jasons tend to be more brusque and less condescending than the Henry series, and in general I prefer them. But it was terrifying now to see that light, to hear that music, to know that the ship's intelligence wanted to speak with me. I shrank back at a tense

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awkward angle, the way one does when trying to avoid a face-to-face confrontation with someone.

But of course the intelligence had no face to confront. The intelligence was only a voice speaking to me out of a speaker grid, and a stew of magnetic impulses somewhere on the control levels of the ship. All the same, I perceived 612 Jason now as a great glowing eye, staring through me to the hidden Vox.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Report summary, Captain. The dead passenger and the missing matrix."

Deep within me I felt a quick plunging sensation, and then the skin of my arms and shoulders began to glow as the chemicals of fear went coursing through my veins in a fierce tide. It was Vox, I knew, reacting in sudden alarm, opening the petcocks of my hormonal system. It was the thing I had dreaded. How could 612 Jason fail to notice that flood of endocrine response?

"Go on," I said, as coolly as I could.

But noticing was one thing, interpreting the data something else. Fluctuations in a human being's endocrine output might have any number of causes. To my troubled conscience everything was a glaring signal of my guilt. 612 Jason gave no indication that it suspected a thing.

The intelligence said, "The dead passenger was Hans Eger Olafssen, 54 years of age, a native of—"

"Never mind his details. You can let me have a printout on that part."

"The missing matrix," 612 Jason went on imperturbably. "Leeleaine Eliani, 17 years of age, a native of Kansas Four, bound for Cul-de-Sac, Vainglory Archipelago, under Transmission Contract No. D-14871532, dated the 27th day of the third month of—"

"Printout on that too," I cut in. "What I want to know is where she is now."

"That information is not available."

"That isn't a responsive answer, 612 Jason."

"No better answer can be provided at this time, Captain. Tracer circuits have been activated and remain in constant search mode."

"And?"

"We have no data on the present location of the missing matrix."

Within me Vox reacted instantly to the intelligence's calm flat statement. The hormonal response changed from one of fear to one of relief. My blazing skin began at once to cool. Would 612 Jason notice that too, and from that small clue be able to assemble the subtext of my body's responses into a sequence that exposed my criminal violation of regulations?

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"Don't relax too soon," I told her silently. "This may be some sort of trap."

To 612 Jason I said, "What data *do* you have, then?"

"Two things are known: the time at which the Eliani matrix achieved negation of its storage circuitry and the time of its presumed attempt at making neural entry into the suspended passenger Olafssen. Beyond that no data has been recovered."

"Its *presumed* attempt?" I said.

"There is no proof, Captain."

"Olafssen's convulsions? The smashing of the storage housing?"

"We know that Olafssen responded to an electrical stimulus, Captain. The source of the stimulus is impossible to trace, although the presumption is that it came from the missing matrix Eliani. These are matters for the subsequent inquiry. It is not within my responsibilities to assign definite causal relationships."

Spoken like a true Jason-series intelligence, I thought.

I said, "You don't have any effective way of tracing the movements of the Eliani matrix, is that what you're telling me?"

"We're dealing with extremely minute impedances, sir. In the ordinary functioning of the ship it is very difficult to distinguish a matrix manifestation from normal surges and pulses in the general electrical system."

"You mean, it might take something as big as the matrix trying to climb back into its own storage circuit to register on the monitoring system?"

"Very possibly, sir."

"Is there any reason to think the Eliani matrix is still on the ship at all?"

"There is no reason to think that it is not, Captain."

"In other words, you don't know anything about anything concerning the Eliani matrix."

"I have provided you with all known data at this point. Trace efforts are continuing, sir."

"You still think this is a trap?" Vox asked me.

"It's sounding better and better by the minute. But shut up and don't distract me, will you?"

To the intelligence I said, "All right, keep me posted on the situation. I'm preparing for sleep, 612 Jason. I want the end-of-day status report, and then I want you to clear off and leave me alone."

"Very good, sir. Fifth virtual day of voyage. Position of ship sixteen units beyond last port of call, Kansas Four. Scheduled rendezvous with relay forces at Ultima Thule spinaround point was successfully achieved at the hour of—"

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The intelligence droned on and on: the usual report of the routine events of the day, broken only by the novelty of an entry for the loss of a passenger and one for the escape of a matrix, then returning to the standard data, fuel levels and velocity soundings and all the rest. On the first four nights of the voyage I had solemnly tried to absorb all this torrent of ritualized downloading of the log as though my captaincy depended on committing it all to memory, but this night I barely listened, and nearly missed my cue when it was time to give it my approval before clocking out for the night. Vox had to prod me and let me know that the intelligence was waiting for something. I gave 612 Jason the confirm-and-clock-out and heard the welcome sound of its diminishing music as it decoupled the contact.

"What do you think?" Vox asked. "It doesn't know, does it?"

"Not yet," I said.

"You really are a pessimist, aren't you?"

"I think we may be able to bring this off," I told her. "But the moment we become overconfident, it'll be the end. Everyone on this ship wants to know where you are. The slightest slip and we're both gone."

"Okay. Don't lecture me."

"I'll try not to. Let's get some sleep now."

"I don't need to sleep."

"Well, I do."

"Can we talk for a while first?"

"Tomorrow," I said.

But of course sleep was impossible. I was all too aware of the stranger within me, perhaps prowling the most hidden places of my psyche at this moment. Or waiting to invade my dreams once I drifted off. For the first time I thought I could feel her presence even when she was silent: a hot node of identity pressing against the wall of my brain. Perhaps I imagined it. I lay stiff and tense, as wide awake as I have ever been in my life. After a time I had to call 612 Jason and ask it to put me under the wire; and even then my sleep was uneasy when it came.

10.

Until that point in the voyage I had taken nearly all of my meals in my quarters. It seemed a way of exerting my authority, such as it was, aboard ship. By my absence from the dining hall I created a presence, that of the austere and aloof captain; and I avoided the embarrassment of having to sit in the seat of command over men who were much my senior in all things. It was no great sacrifice for me. My quarters were more than comfortable, the food was the same as that which was available

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in the dining hall, the servo-steward that brought it was silent and efficient. The question of isolation did not arise. There has always been something solitary about me, as there is about most who are of the Service.

But when I awoke the next morning after what had seemed like an endless night, I went down to the dining hall for breakfast.

It was nothing like a deliberate change of policy, a decision that had been rigorously arrived at through careful reasoning. It wasn't a decision at all. Nor did Vox suggest it, though I'm sure she inspired it. It was purely automatic. I arose, showered, and dressed. I confess that I had forgotten all about the events of the night before. Vox was quiet within me. Not until I was under the shower, feeling the warm comforting ultrasonic vibration, did I remember her: there came a disturbing sensation of being in two places at once, and, immediately afterward, an astonishingly odd feeling of shame at my own nakedness. Both those feelings passed quickly. But they did indeed bring to mind that extraordinary thing which I had managed to suppress for some minutes, that I was no longer alone in my body.

She said nothing. Neither did I. After last night's astounding alliance I seemed to want to pull back into wordlessness, unthinkingness, a kind of automaton consciousness. The need for breakfast occurred to me and I called up a tracker to take me down to the dining hall. When I stepped outside the room I was surprised to encounter my servo-steward, already on its way up with my tray. Perhaps it was just as surprised to see me going out, though of course its blank metal face betrayed no feelings.

"I'll be having breakfast in the dining hall today," I told it.

"Very good, sir."

My tracker arrived. I climbed into its seat and it set out at once on its cushion of air toward the dining hall.

The dining hall of the *Sword of Orion* is a magnificent room at the Eye end of Crew Deck, with one glass wall providing a view of all the lights of heaven. By some whim of the designers we sit with that wall below us, so that the stars and their tethered worlds drift beneath our feet. The other walls are of some silvery metal chased with thin swirls of gold, everything shining by the reflected light of the passing star-clusters. At the center is a table of black stone, with places allotted for each of the seventeen members of the crew. It is a splendid if somewhat ridiculous place, a resonant reminder of the wealth and power of the Service.

Three of my shipmates were at their places when I entered. Pedregal was there, the supercargo, a compact, sullen man whose broad dome of a head seemed to rise directly from his shoulders. And there was Fresco, too, slender and elusive, the navigator, a lithe dark-skinned person of

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ambiguous sex who alternated from voyage to voyage, so I had been told, converting from male to female and back again according to some private rhythm. The third person was Raebuck, whose sphere of responsibility was communications, an older man whose flat, chilly gaze conveyed either boredom or menace, I could never be sure which.

"Why, it's the captain," said Pedregal calmly. "Favoring us with one of his rare visits."

All three stared at me with that curious testing intensity which I was coming to see was an inescapable part of my life aboard ship: a constant hazing meted out to any newcomer to the Service, an interminable probing for the place that was most vulnerable. Mine was a parsec wide and I was certain they would discover it at once. But I was determined to match them stare for stare, ploy for ploy, test for test.

"Good morning, gentlemen," I said. Then, giving Fresco a level glance, I added, "Good morning, Fresco."

I took my seat at the table's head and rang for service.

I was beginning to realize why I had come out of my cabin that morning. In part it was a reflection of Vox's presence within me, an expression of that new component of rashness and impulsiveness that had entered me with her. But mainly it was, I saw now, some stratagem of my own, hatched on some inaccessible subterranean level of my double mind. In order to conceal Vox most effectively, I would have to take the offensive: rather than skulking in my quarters and perhaps awakening perilous suspicions in the minds of my shipmates, I must come forth, defiantly, challengingly, almost flaunting the thing that I had done, and go among them, pretending that nothing unusual was afoot and forcing them to believe it. Such aggressiveness was not natural to my temperament. But perhaps I could draw on some reserves provided by Vox. If not, we both were lost.

Raebuck said, to no one in particular, "I suppose yesterday's disturbing events must inspire a need for companionship in the captain."

I faced him squarely. "I have all the companionship I require, Raebuck. But I agree that what happened yesterday was disturbing."

"A nasty business," Pedregal said, ponderously shaking his neckless head. "And a strange one, a matrix trying to get into a passenger. That's new to me, a thing like that. And to lose the passenger besides—that's bad. That's very bad."

"It does happen, losing a passenger," said Raebuck.

"A long time since it happened on a ship of mine," Pedregal rejoined.

"We lost a whole batch of them on the *Emperor of Callisto*," Fresco said. "You know the story? It was thirty years ago. We were making the run from Van Buren to the San Pedro Cluster. We picked up a supernova pulse and the intelligence on duty went into flicker. Somehow dumped

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a load of aluminum salts in the feed-lines and killed off fifteen, sixteen passengers. I saw the bodies before they went into the converter. Beyond salvage, they were."

"Yes," said Raebuck. "I heard of that one. And then there was the *Queen Astarte,* a couple of years after that. Tchelitchev was her captain, little green-eyed Russian woman from one of the Troika worlds. They were taking a routine inventory and two digits got transposed, and a faulty delivery signal slipped through. I think it was six dead, premature decanting, killed by air poisoning. Tchelitchev took it very badly. *Very* badly. Somehow the captain always does."

"And then that time on the *Hecuba,*" said Pedregal. "No ship of mine, thank God. That was the captain who ran amok, thought the ship was too quiet, wanted to see some passengers moving around and started awakening them—"

Raebuck showed a quiver of surprise. "You know about that? I thought that was supposed to be hushed up."

"Things get around," Pedregal said, with something like a smirk. "The captain's name was Catania-Szu, I believe, a man from Mediterraneo, very high-strung, the way all of them are there. I was working the *Valparaiso* then, out of Mendax Nine bound for Scylla and Charybdis and neighboring points, and when we stopped to download some cargo in the Seneca system I got the whole story from a ship's clerk named—"

"You were on the *Valparaiso*?" Fresco asked. "Wasn't that the ship that had a free matrix, too, ten or eleven years back? A real soul-eater, so the report went—"

"After my time," said Pedregal, blandly waving his hand. "But I did hear of it. You get to hear about everything, when you're downloading cargo. Soul-eater, you say, reminds me of the time—"

And he launched into some tale of horror at a spinaround station in a far quadrant of the galaxy. But he was no more than halfway through it when Raebuck cut in with a gorier reminiscence of his own, and then Fresco, seething with impatience, broke in on him to tell of a ship infested by three free matrixes at once. I had no doubt that all this was being staged for my enlightenment, by way of showing me how seriously such events were taken in the Service, and how the captains under whom they occurred went down in the folklore of the starships with ineradicable black marks. But their attempts to unsettle me, if that is what they were, left me undismayed. Vox, silent within me, infused me with a strange confidence that allowed me to ignore the darker implications of these anecdotes.

I simply listened, playing my role: the neophyte fascinated by the accumulated depth of spacegoing experience that their stories implied.

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Then I said, finally, "When matrixes get loose, how long do they generally manage to stay at large?"

"An hour or two, generally," said Raebuck. "As they drift around the ship, of course, they leave an electrical trail. We track it and close off access routes behind them and eventually we pin them down in close quarters. Then it's not hard to put them back in their bottles."

"And if they've jacked into some member of the crew?"

"That makes it even easier to find them."

Boldly I said, "Was there ever a case where a free matrix jacked into a member of the crew and managed to keep itself hidden?"

"Never," said a new voice. It belonged to Roacher, who had just entered the dining hall. He stood at the far end of the long table, staring at me. His strange luminescent eyes, harsh and probing, came to rest on mine. "No matter how clever the matrix may be, sooner or later the host will find some way to call for help."

"And if the host doesn't choose to call for help?" I asked.

Roacher studied me with great care.

Had I been too bold? Had I given away too much?

"But that would be a violation of regulations!" he said, in a tone of mock astonishment. "That would be a criminal act!"

11.

She asked me to take her starwalking, to show her the full view of the Great Open.

It was the third day of her concealment within me. Life aboard the *Sword of Orion* had returned to routine, or, to be more accurate, it had settled into a new routine in which the presence on board of an undetected and apparently undetectable free matrix was a constant element.

As Vox had suggested, there were some who quickly came to believe that the missing matrix must have slipped off into space, since the watchful ship-intelligences could find no trace of it. But there were others who kept looking over their shoulders, figuratively or literally, as if expecting the fugitive to attempt to thrust herself without warning into the spinal jacks that gave access to their nervous systems. They behaved exactly as if the ship were haunted. To placate those uneasy ones, I ordered round-the-clock circuit sweeps that would report every vagrant pulse and random surge. Each such anomalous electrical event was duly investigated, and, of course, none of these investigations led to anything significant. Now that Vox resided in my brain instead of the ship's wiring, she was beyond any such mode of discovery.

Whether anyone suspected the truth was something I had no way of

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knowing. Perhaps Roacher did; but he made no move to denounce me, nor did he so much as raise the issue of the missing matrix with me at all after that time in the dining hall. He might know nothing whatever; he might know everything, and not care; he might simply be keeping his own counsel for the moment. I had no way of telling.

I was growing accustomed to my double life, and to my daily duplicity. Vox had quickly come to seem as much a part of me as my arm, or my leg. When she was silent—and often I heard nothing from her for hours at a time—I was no more aware of her than I would be, in any special way, of my arm or my leg; but nevertheless I knew somehow that she was there. The boundaries between her mind and mine were eroding steadily. She was learning how to infiltrate me. At times it seemed to me that what we were were joint tenants of the same dwelling, rather than I the permanent occupant and she a guest. I came to perceive my own mind as something not notably different from hers, a mere web of electrical force which for the moment was housed in the soft moist globe that was the brain of the captain of the *Sword of Orion*. Either of us, so it seemed, might come and go within that soft moist globe as we pleased, flitting casually in or out after the wraithlike fashion of matrixes.

At other times it was not at all like that: I gave no thought to her presence and went about my tasks as if nothing had changed for me. Then it would come as a surprise when Vox announced herself to me with some sudden comment, some quick question. I had to learn to guard myself against letting my reaction show, if it happened when I was with other members of the crew. Though no one around us could hear anything when she spoke to me, or I to her, I knew it would be the end for our masquerade if anyone caught me in some unguarded moment of conversation with an unseen companion.

How far she had penetrated my mind began to become apparent to me when she asked to go on a starwalk.

"You know about that?" I said, startled, for starwalking is the private pleasure of the spacegoing and I had not known of it myself before I was taken into the Service.

Vox seemed amazed by my amazement. She indicated casually that the details of starwalking were common knowledge everywhere. But something rang false in her tone. Were the landcrawling folk really so familiar with our special pastime? Or had she picked what she knew of it out of the hitherto private reaches of my consciousness?

I chose not to ask. But I was uneasy about taking her with me into the Great Open, much as I was beginning to yearn for it myself. She was not one of us. She was planetary; she had not passed through the training of the Service.

I told her that.

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"Take me anyway," she said. "It's the only chance I'll ever have."

"But the training—"

"I don't need it. Not if you've had it."

"What if that's not enough?"

"It will be," she said. "I know it will, Adam. There's nothing to be afraid of. You've had the training, haven't you? And I am you."

12.

Together we rode the transit track out of the Eye and down to Drive Deck, where the soul of the ship lies lost in throbbing dreams of the far galaxies as it pulls us ever onward across the unending night.

We passed through zones of utter darkness and zones of cascading light, through places where wheeling helixes of silvery radiance burst like auroras from the air, through passages so crazed in their geometry that they reawakened the terrors of the womb in anyone who traversed them. A starship is the mother of mysteries. Vox crouched, frozen with awe, within that portion of our brain that was hers. I felt the surges of her awe, one after another, as we went downward.

"Are you really sure you want to do this?" I asked.

"Yes!" she cried fiercely. "Keep going!"

"There's the possibility that you'll be detected," I told her.

"There's the possibility that I won't be," she said.

We continued to descend. Now we were in the realm of the three cyborg push-cells, Gabriel, Banquo, and Fleece. Those were three members of the crew whom we would never see at the table in the dining hall, for they dwelled here in the walls of Drive Deck, permanently jacked in, perpetually pumping their energies into the ship's great maw. I have already told you of our saying in the Service, that when you enter you give up the body and you get your soul. For most of us that is only a figure of speech: what we give up, when we say farewell forever to planetskin and take up our new lives in starships, is not the body itself but the body's trivial needs, the sweaty things so dear to shore people. But some of us are more literal in their renunciations. The flesh is a meaningless hindrance to them; they shed it entirely, knowing that they can experience starship life just as fully without it. They allow themselves to be transformed into extensions of the stardrive. From them comes the raw energy out of which is made the power that carries us hurtling through heaven. Their work is unending; their reward is a sort of immortality. It is not a choice I could make, nor, I think, you: but for them it is bliss. There can be no doubt about that.

"Another starwalk so soon, Captain?" Banquo asked. For I had been

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here on the second day of the voyage, losing no time in availing myself of the great privilege of the Service.

"Is there any harm in it?"

"No, no harm," said Banquo. "Just isn't usual, is all."

"That's all right," I said. "That's not important to me."

Banquo is a gleaming metallic ovoid, twice the size of a human head, jacked into a slot in the wall. Within the ovoid is the matrix of what had once been Banquo, long ago on a world called Sunrise where night is unknown. Sunrise's golden dawns and shining days had not been good enough for Banquo, apparently. What Banquo had wanted was to be a gleaming metallic ovoid, hanging on the wall of Drive Deck aboard the *Sword of Orion*.

Any of the three cyborgs could set up a starwalk. But Banquo was the one who had done it for me that other time and it seemed best to return to him. He was the most congenial of the three. He struck me as amiable and easy. Gabriel, on my first visit, had seemed austere, remote, incomprehensible. He is an early model who had lived the equivalent of three human lifetimes as a cyborg aboard starships and there was not much about him that was human any more. Fleece, much younger, quick-minded and quirky, I mistrusted: in her weird edgy way she might just somehow be able to detect the hidden other who would be going along with me for the ride.

You must realize that when we starwalk we do not literally leave the ship, though that is how it seems to us. If we left the ship even for a moment we would be swept away and lost forever in the abyss of heaven. Going outside a starship of heaven is not like stepping outside an ordinary planet-launched shoreship that moves through normal space. But even if it were possible, there would be no point in leaving the ship. There is nothing to see out there. A starship moves through utter empty darkness.

But though there may be nothing to see, that does not mean that there is nothing out there. The entire universe is out there. If we could see it while we are traveling across the special space that is heaven we would find it flattened and curved, so that we had the illusion of viewing everything at once, all the far-flung galaxies back to the beginning of time. This is the Great Open, the totality of the continuum. Our external screens show it to us in simulated form, because we need occasional assurance that it is there.

A starship rides along the mighty lines of force which cross that immense void like the lines of the compass rose on an ancient mariner's map. When we starwalk, we ride those same lines, and we are held by them, sealed fast to the ship that is carrying us onward through heaven. We seem to step forth into space; we seem to look down on the ship, on the stars, on all the worlds of heaven. For the moment we become little

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starships flying along beside the great one that is our mother. It is magic; it is illusion; but it is magic that so closely approaches what we perceive as reality that there is no way to measure the difference, which means that in effect there is no difference.

"Ready?" I asked Vox.

"Absolutely."

Still I hesitated.

"Are you *sure*?"

"Go on," she said impatiently. "Do it!"

I put the jack to my spine myself. Banquo did the matching of impedances. If he were going to discover the passenger I carried, this would be the moment. But he showed no sign that anything was amiss. He queried me; I gave him the signal to proceed; there was a moment of sharp warmth at the back of my neck as my neural matrix, and Vox's traveling with it, rushed out through Banquo and hurtled downward toward its merger with the soul of the ship.

We were seized and drawn in and engulfed by the vast force that is the ship. As the coils of the engine caught us we were spun around and around, hurled from vector to vector, mercilessly stretched, distended by an unimaginable flux. And then there was a brightness all about us, a brightness that cried out in heaven with a mighty clamor. We were outside the ship. We were starwalking.

"Oh," she said. A little soft cry, a muted gasp of wonder.

The blazing mantle of the ship lay upon the darkness of heaven like a white shadow. That great cone of cold fiery light reached far out in front of us, arching awesomely toward heaven's vault, and behind us it extended beyond the limits of our sight. The slender tapering outline of the ship was clearly visible within it, the needle and its Eye, all ten kilometers of it easily apparent to us in a single glance.

And there were the stars. And there were the worlds of heaven.

The effect of the stardrive is to collapse the dimensions, each one in upon the other. Thus inordinate spaces are diminished and the galaxy may be spanned by human voyagers. There is no logic, no linearity of sequence, to heaven as it appears to our eyes. Wherever we look we see the universe bent back upon itself, revealing its entirety in an infinite series of infinite segments of itself. Any sector of stars contains all stars. Any demarcation of time encompasses all of time past and time to come. What we behold is altogether beyond our understanding, which is exactly as it should be; for what we are given, when we look through the Eye of the ship at the naked heavens, is a god's-eye view of the universe. And we are not gods.

"What are we seeing?" Vox murmured within me.

I tried to tell her. I showed her how to define her relative position so

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there would be an up and a down for her, a backward, a forward, a flow of time and event from beginning to end. I pointed out the arbitrary coordinate axes by which we locate ourselves in this fundamentally incomprehensible arena. I found known stars for her, and known worlds, and showed them to her.

She understood nothing. She was entirely lost.

I told her that there was no shame in that.

I told her that I had been just as bewildered, when I was undergoing my training in the simulator. That everyone was; and that no one, not even if he spent a thousand years aboard the starships that plied the routes of heaven, could ever come to anything more than a set of crude equivalents and approximations of understanding what starwalking shows us. Attaining actual understanding itself is beyond the best of us.

I could feel her struggling to encompass the impact of all that rose and wheeled and soared before us. Her mind was agile, though still only half-formed, and I sensed her working out her own system of explanations and assumptions, her analogies, her equivalencies. I gave her no more help. It was best for her to do these things by herself; and in any case I had no more help to give.

I had my own astonishment and bewilderment to deal with, on this my second starwalk in heaven.

Once more I looked down upon the myriad worlds turning in their orbits. I could see them easily, the little bright globes rotating in the huge night of the Great Open: red worlds, blue worlds, green ones, some turning their full faces to me, some showing mere slivers of a crescent. How they cleaved to their appointed tracks! How they clung to their parent stars!

I remembered that other time, only a few virtual days before, when I had felt such compassion for them, such sorrow. Knowing that they were condemned forever to follow the same path about the same star, a hopeless bondage, a meaningless retracing of a perpetual route. In their own eyes they might be footloose wanderers, but to me they had seemed the most pitiful of slaves. And so I had grieved for the worlds of heaven; but now, to my surprise, I felt no pity, only a kind of love. There was no reason to be sad for them. They were what they were, and there was a supreme rightness in those fixed orbits and their obedient movements along them. They were content with being what they were. If they were loosed even a moment from that bondage, such chaos would arise in the universe as could never be contained. Those circling worlds are the foundations upon which all else is built; they know that and they take pride in it; they are loyal to their tasks and we must honor them for their devotion to their duty. And with honor comes love.

This must be Vox speaking within me, I told myself.

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I had never thought such thoughts. Love the planets in their orbits? What kind of notion was that? Perhaps no stranger than my earlier notion of pitying them because they weren't starships; but that thought had arisen from the spontaneous depths of my own spirit and it had seemed to make a kind of sense to me. Now it had given way to a wholly other view.

I loved the worlds that moved before me and yet did not move, in the great night of heaven.

I loved the strange fugitive girl within me who beheld those worlds and loved them for their immobility.

I felt her seize me now, taking me impatiently onward, outward, into the depths of heaven. She understood now; she knew how it was done. And she was far more daring than ever I would have allowed me to be. Together we walked the stars. Not only walked but plunged and swooped and soared, traveling among them like gods. Their hot breath singed us. Their throbbing brightness thundered at us. Their serene movements boomed a mighty music at us. On and on we went, hand in hand, Vox leading, I letting her draw me, deeper and deeper into the shining abyss that was the universe. Until at last we halted, floating in mid-cosmos, the ship nowhere to be seen, only the two of us surrounded by a shield of suns.

In that moment a sweeping ecstasy filled my soul. I felt all eternity within my grasp. No, that puts it the wrong way around and makes it seem that I was seized by delusions of imperial grandeur, which was not at all the case. What I felt was myself within the grasp of all eternity, enfolded in the loving embrace of a complete and perfect cosmos in which nothing was out of place, or ever could be.

It is this that we go starwalking to attain. This sense of belonging, this sense of being contained in the divine perfection of the universe.

When it comes, there is no telling what effect it will have; but inner change is what it usually brings. I had come away from my first starwalk unaware of any transformation; but within three days I had impulsively opened myself to a wandering phantom, violating not only regulations but the nature of my own character as I understood it. I have always, as I think I have said, been an intensely private man. Even though I had given Vox refuge, I had been relieved and grateful that her mind and mine had remained separate entities within our shared brain.

Now I did what I could to break down whatever boundary remained between us.

I hadn't let her know anything, so far, of my life before going to heaven. I had met her occasional questions with coy evasions, with half-truths, with blunt refusals. It was the way I had always been with everyone, a habit of secrecy, an unwillingness to reveal myself. I had been even more

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secretive, perhaps, with Vox than with all the others, because of the very closeness of her mind to mine. As though I feared that by giving her any interior knowledge of me I was opening the way for her to take me over entirely, to absorb me into her own vigorous, undisciplined soul.

But now I offered my past to her in a joyous rush. We began to make our way slowly backward from that apocalyptic place at the center of everything; and as we hovered on the breast of the Great Open, drifting between the darkness and the brilliance of the light that the ship created, I told her everything about myself that I had been holding back.

I suppose they were mere trivial things, though to me they were all so highly charged with meaning. I told her the name of my home planet. I let her see it, the sea the color of lead, the sky the color of smoke. I showed her the sparse and scrubby gray headlands behind our house, where I would go running for hours by myself, a tall slender boy pounding tirelessly across the crackling sands as though demons were pursuing him.

I showed her everything: the somber child, the troubled youth, the wary, overcautious young man. The playmates who remained forever strangers, the friends whose voices were drowned in hollow babbling echoes, the lovers whose love seemed without substance or meaning. I told her of my feeling that I was the only one alive in the world, that everyone about me was some sort of artificial being full of gears and wires. Or that the world was only a flat colorless dream in which I somehow had become trapped, but from which I would eventually awaken into the true world of light and color and richness of texture. Or that I might not be human at all, but had been abandoned in the human galaxy by creatures of another form entirely, who would return for me some day far in the future.

I was lighthearted as I told her these things, and she received them lightly. She knew them for what they were—not symptoms of madness, but only the bleak fantasies of a lonely child, seeking to make sense out of an incomprehensible universe in which he felt himself to be a stranger and afraid.

"But you escaped," she said. "You found a place where you belonged!"

"Yes," I said. "I escaped."

And I told her of the day when I had seen a sudden light in the sky. My first thought then had been that my true parents had come back for me; my second, that it was some comet passing by. That light was a starship of heaven that had come to worldward in our system. And as I looked upward through the darkness on that day long ago, straining to catch a glimpse of the shoreships that were going up to it bearing cargo and passengers to be taken from our world to some unknowable

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place at the other end of the galaxy, I realized that that starship was my true home. I realized that the Service was my destiny.

And so it came to pass, I said, that I left my world behind, and my name, and my life, such as it had been, to enter the company of those who sail between the stars. I let her know that this was my first voyage, explaining that it is the peculiar custom of the Service to test all new officers by placing them in command at once. She asked me if I had found happiness here; and I said, quickly, Yes, I had, and then I said a moment later, Not yet, not yet, but I see at least the possibility of it.

She was quiet for a time. We watched the worlds turning and the stars like blazing spikes of color racing toward their far-off destinations, and the fiery white light of the ship itself streaming in the firmament as if it were the blood of some alien god. The thought came to me of all that I was risking by hiding her like this within me. I brushed it aside. This was neither the place nor the moment for doubt or fear or misgiving.

Then she said, "I'm glad you told me all that, Adam."

"Yes. I am too."

"I could feel it from the start, what sort of person you were. But I needed to hear it in your own words, your own thoughts. It's just like I've been saying. You and I, we're two of a kind. Square pegs in a world of round holes. You ran away to the Service and I ran away to a new life in somebody else's body."

I realized that Vox wasn't speaking of my body, but of the new one that waited for her on Cul-de-Sac.

And I realized too that there was one thing about herself that she had never shared with me, which was the nature of the flaw in her old body that had caused her to discard it. If I knew her more fully, I thought, I could love her more deeply: imperfections and all, which is the way of love. But she had shied away from telling me that, and I had never pressed her on it. Now, out here under the cool gleam of heaven, surely we had moved into a place of total trust, of complete union of soul.

I said, "Let me see you, Vox."

"See me? How could you—"

"Give me an image of yourself. You're too abstract for me this way. *Vox*. A voice. Only a voice. You talk to me, you live within me, and I still don't have the slightest idea what you look like."

"That's how I want it to be."

"Won't you show me how you look?"

"I won't look like anything. I'm a matrix. I'm nothing but electricity."

"I understand that. I mean how you looked *before*. Your old self, the one you left behind on Kansas Four."

She made no reply.

I thought she was hesitating, deciding; but some time went by, and

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still I heard nothing from her. What came from her was silence, only silence, a silence that had crashed down between us like a steel curtain.

"Vox?"

Nothing.

Where was she hiding? What had I done?

"What's the matter? Is it the thing I asked you?"

No answer.

"It's all right, Vox. Forget about it. It isn't important at all. You don't have to show me anything you don't want to show me."

Nothing. Silence.

"Vox? Vox?"

The worlds and stars wheeled in chaos before me. The light of the ship roared up and down the spectrum from end to end. In growing panic I sought for her and found no trace of her presence within me. Nothing. Nothing.

"Are you all right?" came another voice. Banquo, from inside the ship. "I'm getting some pretty wild signals. You'd better come in. You've been out there long enough as it is."

Vox was gone. I had crossed some uncrossable boundary and I had frightened her away.

Numbly I gave Banquo the signal, and he brought me back inside.

13.

Alone, I made my way upward level by level through the darkness and mystery of the ship, toward the Eye. The crash of silence went on and on, like the falling of some colossal wave on an endless shore. I missed Vox terribly. I had never known such complete solitude as I felt now. I had not realized how accustomed I had become to her being there, nor what impact her leaving would have on me. In just those few days of giving her sanctuary, it had somehow come to seem to me that to house two souls within one brain was the normal condition of mankind, and that to be alone in one's skull as I was now was a shameful thing.

As I neared the place where Crew Deck narrows into the curve of the Eye a slender figure stepped without warning from the shadows.

"Captain."

My mind was full of the loss of Vox and he caught me unaware. I jumped back, badly startled.

"For the love of God, man!"

"It's just me. Bulgar. Don't be so scared, Captain. It's only Bulgar."

"Let me be," I said, and brusquely beckoned him away.

"No. Wait, Captain. Please, wait."

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He clutched at my arm, holding me as I tried to go. I halted and turned toward him, trembling with anger and surprise.

Bulgar, Roacher's jackmate, was a gentle, soft-voiced little man, wide-mouthed, olive-skinned, with huge sad eyes. He and Roacher had sailed the skies of heaven together since before I was born. They complemented each other. Where Roacher was small and hard, like fruit that has been left to dry in the sun for a hundred years, his jackmate Bulgar was small and tender, with a plump, succulent look about him. Together they seemed complete, an unassailable whole: I could readily imagine them lying together in their bunk, each jacked to the other, one person in two bodies, linked more intimately even than Vox and I had been.

With an effort I recovered my poise. Tightly I said, "What is it, Bulgar?"

"Can we talk a minute, Captain?"

"We are talking. What do you want with me?"

"That loose matrix, sir."

My reaction must have been stronger than he was expecting. His eyes went wide and he took a step or two back from me.

Moistening his lips, he said, "We were wondering, Captain—wondering how the search is going—whether you had any idea where the matrix might be—"

I said stiffly, "Who's *we*, Bulgar?"

"The men. Roacher. Me. Some of the others. Mainly Roacher, sir."

"Ah. So Roacher wants to know where the matrix is."

The little man moved closer. I saw him staring deep into me as though searching for Vox behind the mask of my carefully expressionless face. Did he know? Did they all? I wanted to cry out, *She's not there any more, she's gone, she left me, she ran off into space.* But apparently what was troubling Roacher and his shipmates was something other than the possibility that Vox had taken refuge with me.

Bulgar's tone was soft, insinuating, concerned. "Roacher's very worried, Captain. He's been on ships with loose matrixes before. He knows how much trouble they can be. He's really worried, Captain. I have to tell you that. I've never seen him so worried."

"What does he think the matrix will do to him?"

"He's afraid of being taken over," Bulgar said.

"Taken over?"

"The matrix coming into his head through his jack. Mixing itself up with his brain. It's been known to happen, Captain."

"And why should it happen to Roacher, out of all the men on this ship? Why not you? Why not Pedregal? Or Rio de Rio? Or one of the passengers again?" I took a deep breath. "Why not me, for that matter?"

"He just wants to know, sir, what's the situation with the matrix now.

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Whether you've discovered anything about where it is. Whether you've been able to trap it."

There was something strange in Bulgar's eyes. I began to think I was being tested again. This assertion of Roacher's alleged terror of being infiltrated and possessed by the wandering matrix might simply be a roundabout way of finding out whether that had already happened to me.

"Tell him it's gone," I said.

"Gone, sir?"

"Gone. Vanished. It isn't anywhere on the ship any more. Tell him that, Bulgar. He can forget about her slithering down his precious jackhole."

"Her?"

"Female matrix, yes. But that doesn't matter now. She's gone. You can tell him that. Escaped. Flew off into heaven. The emergency's over." I glowered at him. I yearned to be rid of him, to go off by myself to nurse my new grief. "Shouldn't you be getting back to your post, Bulgar?"

Did he believe me? Or did he think that I had slapped together some transparent lie to cover my complicity in the continued absence of the matrix? I had no way of knowing. Bulgar gave me a little obsequious bow and started to back away.

"Sir," he said. "Thank you, sir. I'll tell him, sir."

He retreated into the shadows. I continued uplevel.

I passed Katkat on my way, and, a little while afterward, Raebuck. They looked at me without speaking. There was something reproachful but almost loving about Katkat's expression, but Raebuck's icy, baleful stare brought me close to flinching. In their different ways they were saying, *Guilty, guilty, guilty*. But of what?

Before, I had imagined that everyone whom I encountered aboard ship was able to tell at a single glance that I was harboring the fugitive, and was simply waiting for me to reveal myself with some foolish slip. Now everything was reversed. They looked at me and I told myself that they were thinking, *He's all alone by himself in there, he doesn't have anyone else at all,* and I shrank away, shamed by my solitude. I knew that this was the edge of madness. I was overwrought, overtired; perhaps it had been a mistake to go starwalking a second time so soon after my first. I needed to rest. I needed to hide.

I began to wish that there were someone aboard the *Sword of Orion* with whom I could discuss these things. But who, though? Roacher? 612 Jason? I was altogether isolated here. The only one I could speak to on this ship was Vox. And she was gone.

In the safety of my cabin I jacked myself into the mediq rack and gave

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myself a ten-minute purge. That helped. The phantom fears and intricate uncertainties that had taken possession of me began to ebb.

I keyed up the log and ran through the list of my captainly duties, such as they were, for the rest of the day. We were approaching a spinaround point, one of those nodes of force positioned equidistantly across heaven which a starship in transit must seize and use in order to propel itself onward through the next sector of the universe. Spinaround acquisition is performed automatically but at least in theory the responsibility for carrying it out successfully falls to the captain: I would give the commands, I would oversee the process from initiation through completion.

But there was still time for that.

I accessed 49 Henry Henry, who was the intelligence on duty, and asked for an update on the matrix situation.

"No change, sir," the intelligence reported at once.

"What does that mean?"

"Trace efforts continue as requested, sir. But we have not detected the location of the missing matrix."

"No clues? Not even a hint?"

"No data at all, sir. There's essentially no way to isolate the minute electromagnetic pulse of a free matrix from the background noise of the ship's entire electrical system."

I believed it. 612 Jason had told me that in nearly the same words.

I said, "I have reason to think that the matrix is no longer on the ship, 49 Henry Henry."

"Do you, sir?" said 49 Henry Henry in its usual aloof, half-mocking way.

"I do, yes. After a careful study of the situation, it's my opinion that the matrix exited the ship earlier this day and will not be heard from again."

"Shall I record that as an official position, sir?"

"Record it," I said.

"Done, sir."

"And therefore, 49 Henry Henry, you can cancel search mode immediately and close the file. We'll enter a debit for one matrix and the Service bookkeepers can work it out later."

"Very good, sir."

"Decouple," I ordered the intelligence.

49 Henry Henry went away. I sat quietly amid the splendors of my cabin, thinking back over my starwalk and reliving that sense of harmony, of love, of oneness with the worlds of heaven, that had come over me while Vox and I drifted on the bosom of the Great Open. And feeling once again the keen slicing sense of loss that I had felt since Vox's

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departure from me. In a little while I would have to rise and go to the command center and put myself through the motions of overseeing spin-around acquisition; but for the moment I remained where I was, motionless, silent, peering deep into the heart of my solitude.

"I'm not gone," said an unexpected quiet voice.

It came like a punch beneath the heart. It was a moment before I could speak.

"Vox?" I said at last. "Where are you, Vox?"

"Right here."

"Where?" I asked.

"Inside. I never went away."

"You never—"

"You upset me. I just had to hide for a while."

"You knew I was trying to find you?"

"Yes."

Color came to my cheeks. Anger roared like a stream in spate through my veins. I felt myself blazing.

"You knew how I felt, when you—when it seemed that you weren't there any more."

"Yes," she said, even more quietly, after a time.

I forced myself to grow calm. I told myself that she owed me nothing, except perhaps gratitude for sheltering her, and that whatever pain she had caused me by going silent was none of her affair. I reminded myself also that she was a child, unruly and turbulent and undisciplined.

After a bit I said, "I missed you. I missed you more than I want to say."

"I'm sorry," she said, sounding repentant, but not very. "I had to go away for a time. You upset me, Adam."

"By asking you to show me how you used to look?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand why that upset you so much."

"You don't have to," Vox said. "I don't mind now. You can see me, if you like. Do you still want to? Here. This is me. This is what I used to be. If it disgusts you don't blame me. Okay? Okay, Adam? Here. Have a look. Here I am."

14.

There was a wrenching within me, a twisting, a painful yanking sensation, as of some heavy barrier forcibly being pulled aside. And then the glorious radiant scarlet sky of Kansas Four blossomed on the screen of my mind.

She didn't simply show it to me. She took me there. I felt the soft moist

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wind on my face, I breathed the sweet, faintly pungent air, I heard the sly rustling of glossy leathery fronds that dangled from bright yellow trees. Beneath my bare feet the black soil was warm and spongy.

I was Leeleaine, who liked to call herself Vox. I was seventeen years old and swept by forces and compulsions as powerful as hurricanes.

I was her from within and also I saw her from outside.

My hair was long and thick and dark, tumbling down past my shoulders in an avalanche of untended curls and loops and snags. My hips were broad, my breasts were full and heavy: I could feel the pull of them, the pain of them. It was almost as if they were stiff with milk, though they were not. My face was tense, alert, sullen, aglow with angry intelligence. It was not an unappealing face. Vox was not an unappealing girl.

From her earlier reluctance to show herself to me I had expected her to be ugly, or perhaps deformed in some way, dragging herself about in a coarse, heavy, burdensome husk of flesh that was a constant reproach to her. She had spoken of her life on Kansas Four as being so dreary, so sad, so miserable, that she saw no hope in staying there. And had given up her body to be turned into mere electricity, on the promise that she could have a new body—any body—when she reached Cul-de-Sac. *I hated my body,* she had told me. *I couldn't wait to be rid of it.* She had refused even to give me a glimpse of it, retreating instead for hours into a desperate silence so total that I thought she had fled.

All that was a mystery to me now. The Leeleaine that I saw, that I was, was a fine sturdy-looking girl. Not beautiful, no, too strong and strapping for that, I suppose, but far from ugly: her eyes were warm and intelligent, her lips full, her nose finely modeled. And it was a healthy body, too, robust, vital. Of course she had no deformities; and why had I thought she had, when it would have been a simple matter of retrogenetic surgery to amend any bothersome defect? No, there was nothing wrong with the body that Vox had abandoned and for which she professed such loathing, for which she felt such shame.

Then I realized that I was seeing her from outside.

I was seeing her as if by relay, filtering and interpreting the information she was offering me by passing it through the mind of an objective observer: myself. Who understood nothing, really, of what it was like to be anyone but himself.

Somehow—it was one of those automatic, unconscious adjustments—I altered the focus of my perceptions. All old frames of reference fell away and I let myself lose any sense of the separateness of our identities.

I was her. Fully, unconditionally, inextricably.

And I understood.

Figures flitted about her, shadowy, baffling, maddening. Brothers, sis-

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ters, parents, friends: they were all strangers to her. Everyone on Kansas Four was a stranger to her. And always would be.

She hated her body not because it was weak or unsightly but because it was her prison. She was enclosed within it as though within narrow stone walls. It hung about her, a cage of flesh, holding her down, pinning her to this lovely world called Kansas Four where she knew only pain and isolation and estrangement. Her body—her perfectly acceptable, healthy body—had become hateful to her because it was the emblem and symbol of her soul's imprisonment. Wild and incurably restless by temperament, she had failed to find a way to live within the smothering predictability of Kansas Four, a planet where she would never be anything but an internal outlaw. The only way she could leave Kansas Four was to surrender the body that tied her to it; and so she had turned against it with fury and loathing, rejecting it, abandoning it, despising it, detesting it. No one could ever understand that who beheld her from the outside.

But I understood.

I understood much more than that, in that one flashing moment of communion that she and I had. I came to see what she meant when she said that I was her twin, her double, her other self. Of course we were wholly different, I the sober, staid, plodding, diligent man, and she the reckless, volatile, impulsive, tempestuous girl. But beneath all that we were the same: misfits, outsiders, troubled wanderers through worlds we had never made. We had found vastly differing ways to cope with our pain. Yet we were one and the same, two halves of a single entity.

We will remain together always now, I told myself.

And in that moment our communion broke. She broke it—it must have been she, fearful of letting this new intimacy grow too deep—and I found myself apart from her once again, still playing host to her in my brain but separated from her by the boundaries of my own individuality, my own selfhood. I felt her nearby, within me, a warm but discrete presence. Still within me, yes. But separate again.

15.

There was shipwork to do. For days now, Vox's invasion of me had been a startling distraction. But I dared not let myself forget that we were in the midst of a traversal of heaven. The lives of us all, and of our passengers, depended on the proper execution of our duties: even mine. And worlds awaited the bounty that we bore. My task of the moment was to oversee spinaround acquisition.

I told Vox to leave me temporarily while I went through the routines

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of acquisition. I would be jacked to other crewmen for a time; they might very well be able to detect her within me; there was no telling what might happen. But she refused. "No," she said. "I won't leave you. I don't want to go out there. But I'll hide, deep down, the way I did when I was upset with you."

"Vox—" I began.

"No. Please. I don't want to talk about it."

There was no time to argue the point. I could feel the depth and intensity of her stubborn determination.

"Hide, then," I said. "If that's what you want to do."

I made my way down out of the Eye to Engine Deck.

The rest of the acquisition team was already assembled in the Great Navigation Hall: Fresco, Raebuck, Roacher. Raebuck's role was to see to it that communications channels were kept open, Fresco's to set up the navigation coordinates, and Roacher, as power engineer, would monitor fluctuations in drain and input-output cycling. My function was to give the cues at each stage of acquisition. In truth I was pretty much redundant, since Raebuck and Fresco and Roacher had been doing this sort of thing a dozen times a voyage for scores of voyages and they had little need of my guidance.

The deeper truth was that they were redundant too, for 49 Henry Henry would oversee us all, and the intelligence was quite capable of setting up the entire process without any human help. Nevertheless there were formalities to observe, and not inane ones.

Intelligences are far superior to humans in mental capacity, interfacing capability, and reaction time, but even so they are nothing but servants, and artificial servants at that, lacking in any real awareness of human fragility or human ethical complexity. They must only be used as tools, not decision-makers. A society which delegates responsibilities of life and death to its servants will eventually find the servants' hands at its throat. As for me, novice that I was, my role was valid as well: the focal point of the enterprise, the prime initiator, the conductor and observer of the process. Perhaps anyone could perform those functions, but the fact remained that *someone* had to, and by tradition that someone was the captain. Call it a ritual, call it a highly stylized dance, if you will. But there is no getting away from the human need for ritual and stylization. Such aspects of a process may not seem essential, but they are valuable and significant, and ultimately they can be seen to be essential as well.

"Shall we begin?" Fresco asked.

We jacked up, Roacher directly into the ship, Raebuck into Roacher, Fresco to me, me into the ship.

"Simulation," I said.

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Raebuck keyed in the first code and the vast echoing space that was the Great Navigation Hall came alive with pulsing light: a representation of heaven all about us, the lines of force, the spinaround nodes, the stars, the planets. We moved unhinderedly in free fall, drifting as casually as angels. We could easily have believed we were starwalking.

The simulacrum of the ship was a bright arrow of fierce light just below us and to the left. Ahead, throbbing like a nest of twining angry serpents, was the globe that represented the Lasciate Ogni Speranza spinaround point, tightly-wound dull gray cables shot through with strands of fierce scarlet.

"Enter approach mode," I said. "Activate receptors. Begin threshold equalization. Begin momentum comparison. Prepare for acceleration uptick. Check angular velocity. Begin spin consolidation. Enter displacement select. Extend mast. Prepare for acquisition receptivity."

At each command the proper man touched a control key or pressed a directive panel or simply sent an impulse shooting through the jack hookup by which he was connected, directly or indirectly, to the mind of the ship.

Out of courtesy to me, they waited until the commands were given, but the speed with which they obeyed told me that their minds were already in motion even as I spoke.

"It's really exciting, isn't it?" Vox said suddenly.

"For God's sake, Vox! What are you trying to do?"

For all I knew, the others had heard her outburst as clearly as though it had come across a loudspeaker.

"I mean," she went on, "I never imagined it was anything like this. I can feel the whole—"

I shot her a sharp, anguished order to keep quiet. Her surfacing like this, after my warning to her, was a lunatic act. In the silence that followed I felt a kind of inner reverberation, a sulky twanging of displeasure coming from her. But I had no time to worry about Vox's moods now.

Arcing patterns of displacement power went ricocheting through the Great Navigation Hall as our mast came forth—not the underpinning for a set of sails, as it would be on a vessel that plied planetary seas, but rather a giant antenna to link us to the spinaround point ahead—and the ship and the spinaround point reached toward one another like grappling many-armed wrestlers. Hot streaks of crimson and emerald and gold and amethyst speared the air, vaulting and rebounding. The spinaround point, activated now and trembling between energy states, was enfolding us in its million tentacles, capturing us, making ready to whirl on its axis and hurl us swiftly onward toward the next way-station in our journey across heaven.

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"Acquisition," Raebuck announced.
"Proceed to capture acceptance," I said.
"Acceptance," said Raebuck.
"Directional mode," I said. "Dimensional grid eleven."
"Dimensional grid eleven," Fresco repeated.
The whole hall seemed on fire now.
"Wonderful," Vox murmured. "So beautiful—"
"Vox!"
"Request spin authorization," said Fresco.
"Spin authorization granted," I said. "Grid eleven."
"Grid eleven," Fresco said again. "Spin achieved."

A tremor went rippling through me—and through Fresco, through Raebuck, through Roacher. It was the ship, in the persona of 49 Henry Henry, completing the acquisition process. We had been captured by Lasciate Ogni Speranza, we had undergone velocity absorption and redirection, we had had new spin imparted to us, and we had been sent soaring off through heaven toward our upcoming port of call. I heard Vox sobbing within me, not a sob of despair but one of ecstasy, of fulfillment.

We all unjacked. Raebuck, that dour man, managed a little smile as he turned to me.

"Nicely done, Captain," he said.

"Yes," said Fresco. "Very nice. You're a quick learner."

I saw Roacher studying me with those little shining eyes of his. Go on, you bastard, I thought. You give me a compliment too now, if you know how.

But all he did was stare. I shrugged and turned away. What Roacher thought or said made little difference to me, I told myself.

As we left the Great Navigation Hall in our separate directions Fresco fell in alongside me. Without a word we trudged together toward the transit trackers that were waiting for us. Just as I was about to board mine he—or was it she?—said softly, "Captain?"

"What is it, Fresco?"

Fresco leaned close. Soft sly eyes, tricksy little smile; and yet I felt some warmth coming from the navigator.

"It's a very dangerous game, Captain."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do," Fresco said. "No use pretending. We were jacked together in there. I felt things. I know."

There was nothing I could say, so I said nothing.

After a moment Fresco said, "I like you. I won't harm you. But Roacher knows too. I don't know if he knew before, but he certainly knows now. If I were you, I'd find that very troublesome, Captain. Just a word to the wise. All right?"

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16.

Only a fool would have remained on such a course as I had been following. Vox saw the risks as well as I. There was no hiding anything from anyone any longer; if Roacher knew, then Bulgar knew, and soon it would be all over the ship. No question, either, but that 49 Henry Henry knew. In the intimacies of our navigation-hall contact, Vox must have been as apparent to them as a red scarf around my forehead.

There was no point in taking her to task for revealing her presence within me like that during acquisition. What was done was done. At first it had seemed impossible to understand why she had done such a thing; but then it became all too easy to comprehend. It was the same sort of unpredictable, unexamined, impulsive behavior that had led her to go barging into a suspended passenger's mind and cause his death. She was simply not one who paused to think before acting. That kind of behavior has always been bewildering to me. She was my opposite as well as my double. And yet had I not done a Vox-like thing myself, taking her into me, when she appealed to me for sanctuary, without stopping at all to consider the consequences?

"Where can I go?" she asked, desperate. "If I move around the ship freely again they'll track me and close me off. And then they'll eradicate me. They'll—"

"Easy," I said. "Don't panic. I'll hide you where they won't find you."

"Inside some passenger?"

"We can't try that again. There's no way to prepare the passenger for what's happening to him, and he'll panic. No. I'll put you in one of the annexes. Or maybe one of the virtualities."

"The what?"

"The additional cargo area. The subspace extensions that surround the ship."

She gasped. "Those aren't even real! I was in them, when I was traveling around the ship. Those are just clusters of probability waves!"

"You'll be safe there," I said.

"I'm afraid. It's bad enough that *I'm* not real any more. But to be stored in a place that isn't real either—"

"You're as real as I am. And the outstructures are just as real as the rest of the ship. It's a different quality of reality, that's all. Nothing bad will happen to you out there. You've told me yourself that you've already been in them, right? And got out again without any problems. They won't be able to detect you there, Vox. But I tell you this, that if you stay in me, or anywhere else in the main part of the ship, they'll track you down and find you and eradicate you. And probably eradicate me right along with you."

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"Do you mean that?" she said, sounding chastened.

"Come on. There isn't much time."

On the pretext of a routine inventory check—well within my table of responsibilities—I obtained access to one of the virtualities. It was the storehouse where the probability stabilizers were kept. No one was likely to search for her there. The chances of our encountering a zone of probability turbulence between here and Cul-de-Sac were minimal; and in the ordinary course of a voyage nobody cared to enter any of the virtualities.

I had lied to Vox, or at least committed a half-truth, by leading her to believe that all our outstructures are of an equal level of reality. Certainly the annexes are tangible, solid; they differ from the ship proper only in the spin of their dimensional polarity. They are invisible except when activated, and they involve us in no additional expenditure of fuel, but there is no uncertainty about their existence, which is why we entrust valuable cargo to them, and on some occasions even passengers.

The extensions are a level further removed from basic reality. They are skewed not only in dimensional polarity but in temporal contiguity: that is, we carry them with us under time displacement, generally ten to twenty virtual years in the past or future. The risks of this are extremely minor and the payoff in reduction of generating cost is great. Still, we are measurably more cautious about what sort of cargo we keep in them.

As for the virtualities—

Their name itself implies their uncertainty. They are purely probabilistic entities, existing most of the time in the stochastic void that surrounds the ship. In simpler words, whether they are actually there or not at any given time is a matter worth wagering on. We know how to access them at the time of greatest probability, and our techniques are quite reliable, which is why we can use them for overflow ladings when our cargo uptake is unusually heavy. But in general we prefer not to entrust anything very important to them, since a virtuality's range of access times can fluctuate in an extreme way, from a matter of microseconds to a matter of megayears, and that can make quick recall a chancy affair.

Knowing all this, I put Vox in a virtuality anyway.

I had to hide her. And I had to hide her in a place where no one would look. The risk that I'd be unable to call her up again because of virtuality fluctuation was a small one. The risk was much greater that she would be detected, and she and I both punished, if I let her remain in any area of the ship that had a higher order of probability.

"I want you to stay here until the coast is clear," I told her sternly. "No impulsive journeys around the ship, no excursions into adjoining

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outstructures, no little trips of any kind, regardless of how restless you get. Is that clear? I'll call you up from here as soon as I think it's safe."

"I'll miss you, Adam."

"The same here. But this is how it has to be."

"I know."

"If you're discovered, I'll deny I know anything about you. I mean that, Vox."

"I understand."

"You won't be stuck in here long. I promise you that."

"Will you visit me?"

"That wouldn't be wise," I said.

"But maybe you will anyway."

"Maybe. I don't know." I opened the access channel. The virtuality gaped before us. "Go on," I said. "In with you. In. Now. Go, Vox. Go."

I could feel her leaving me. It was almost like an amputation. The silence, the emptiness, that descended on me suddenly was ten times as deep as what I had felt when she had merely been hiding within me. She was gone, now. For the first time in days, I was truly alone.

I closed off the virtuality.

When I returned to the Eye, Roacher was waiting for me near the command bridge.

"You have a moment, Captain?"

"What is it, Roacher?"

"The missing matrix. We have proof it's still on board ship."

"Proof?"

"You know what I mean. You felt it just like I did while we were doing acquisition. It said something. It spoke. It was right in there in the navigation hall with us, Captain."

I met his luminescent gaze levelly and said in an even voice, "I was giving my complete attention to what we were doing, Roacher. Spina-round acquisition isn't second nature to me the way it is to you. I had no time to notice any matrixes floating around in there."

"You didn't?"

"No. Does that disappoint you?"

"That might mean that you're the one carrying the matrix," he said.

"How so?"

"If it's in you, down on a subneural level, you might not even be aware of it. But we would be. Raebuck, Fresco, me. We all detected something, Captain. If it wasn't in us it would have to be in you. We can't have a matrix riding around inside our captain, you know. No telling how that could distort his judgment. What dangers that might lead us into."

"I'm not carrying any matrixes, Roacher."

"Can we be sure of that?"

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"Would you like to have a look?"

"A jackup, you mean? You and me?"

The notion disgusted me. But I had to make the offer.

"A—jackup, yes," I said. "Communion. You and me, Roacher. Right now. Come on, we'll measure the bandwidths and do the matching. Let's get this over with."

He contemplated me a long while, as if calculating the likelihood that I was bluffing. In the end he must have decided that I was too naïve to be able to play the game out to so hazardous a turn. He knew that I wouldn't bluff, that I was confident he would find me untenanted or I never would have made the offer.

"No," he said finally. "We don't need to bother with that."

"Are you sure?"

"If you say you're clean—"

"But I might be carrying her and not even know it," I said. "You told me that yourself."

"Forget it. You'd know, if you had her in you."

"You'll never be certain of that unless you look. Let's jack up, Roacher."

He scowled. "Forget it," he said again, and turned away. "You must be clean, if you're this eager for jacking. But I'll tell you this, Captain. We're going to find her, wherever she's hiding. And when we do—"

He left the threat unfinished. I stood staring at his retreating form until he was lost to view.

17.

For a few days everything seemed back to normal. We sped onward toward Cul-de-Sac. I went through the round of my regular tasks, however meaningless they seemed to me. Most of them did. I had not yet achieved any sense that the *Sword of Orion* was under my command in anything but the most hypothetical way. Still, I did what I had to do.

No one spoke of the missing matrix within my hearing. On those rare occasions when I encountered some other member of the crew while I moved about the ship, I could tell by the hooded look of his eyes that I was still under suspicion. But they had no proof. The matrix was no longer in any way evident on board. The ship's intelligences were unable to find the slightest trace of its presence.

I was alone, and oh! it was a painful business for me.

I suppose that once you have tasted that kind of round-the-clock communion, that sort of perpetual jacking, you are never the same again. I don't know: there is no real information available on cases of possession by free matrix, only shipboard folklore, scarcely to be taken seriously.

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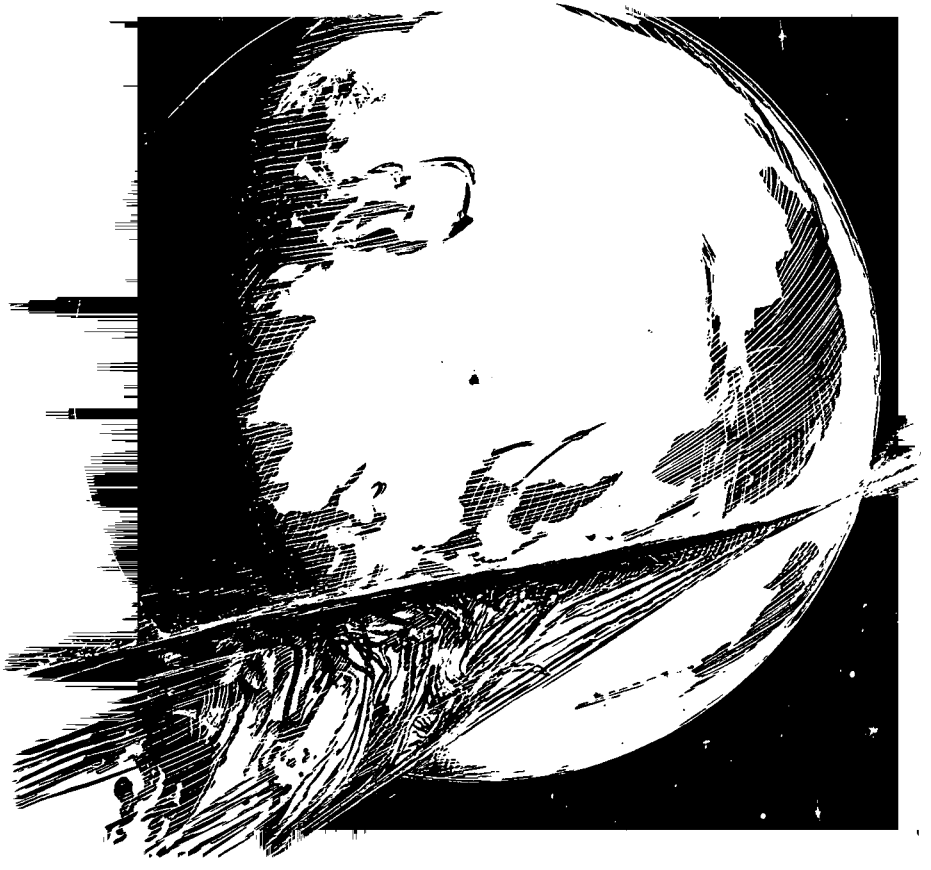

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All I can judge by is my own misery now that Vox was actually gone. She was only a half-grown girl, a wild coltish thing, unstable, unformed; and yet, and yet, she had lived within me and we had come toward one another to construct the deepest sort of sharing, what was almost a kind of marriage. You could call it that.

After five or six days I knew I had to see her again. Whatever the risks.

I accessed the virtuality and sent a signal into it that I was coming in. There was no reply; and for one terrible moment I feared the worst, that in the mysterious workings of the virtuality she had somehow been engulfed and destroyed. But that was not the case. I stepped through the glowing pink-edged field of light that was the gateway to the virtuality, and instantly I felt her near me, clinging tight, trembling with joy.

She held back, though, from entering me. She wanted me to tell her it was safe. I beckoned her in; and then came that sharp warm sensation I remembered so well, as she slipped down into my neural network and we became one.

"I can only stay a little while," I said. "It's still very chancy for me to be with you."

"Oh, Adam, Adam, it's been so awful for me in here—"

"I know. I can imagine."

"Are they still looking for me?"

"I think they're starting to put you out of their minds," I said. And we both laughed at the play on words that that phrase implied.

I didn't dare remain more than a few minutes. I had only wanted to touch souls with her briefly, to reassure myself that she was all right and to ease the pain of separation. But it was irregular for a captain to enter a virtuality at all. To stay in one for any length of time exposed me to real risk of detection.

But my next visit was longer, and the one after that longer still. We were like furtive lovers meeting in a dark forest for hasty delicious trysts. Hidden there in that not-quite-real outstructure of the ship we would join our two selves and whisper together with urgent intensity until I felt it was time for me to leave. She would always try to keep me longer; but her resistance to my departure was never great, nor did she ever suggest accompanying me back into the stable sector of the ship. She had come to understand that the only place we could meet was in the virtuality.

We were nearing the vicinity of Cul-de-Sac now. Soon we would go to worldward and the shoreships would travel out to meet us, so that we could download the cargo that was meant for them. It was time to begin considering the problem of what would happen to Vox when we reached our destination.

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That was something I was unwilling to face. However I tried, I could not force myself to confront the difficulties that I knew lay just ahead.

But she could.

"We must be getting close to Cul-de-Sac now," she said.

"We'll be there soon, yes."

"I've been thinking about that. How I'm going to deal with that."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a lost soul," she said. "Literally. There's no way I can come to life again."

"I don't under—"

"Adam, don't you see?" she cried fiercely. "I can't just float down to Cul-de-Sac and grab myself a body and put myself on the roster of colonists. And you can't possibly smuggle me down there while nobody's looking. The first time anyone ran an inventory check, or did passport control, I'd be dead. No, the only way I can get there is to be neatly packed up again in my original storage circuit. And even if I could figure out how to get back into that, I'd be simply handing myself over for punishment or even eradication. I'm listed as missing on the manifest, right? And I'm wanted for causing the death of that passenger. Now I turn up again, in my storage circuit. You think they'll just download me nicely to Cul-de-Sac and give me the body that's waiting for me there? Not very likely. Not likely that I'll ever get out of that circuit alive, is it, once I go back in? Assuming I *could* go back in in the first place. I don't know how a storage circuit is operated, do you? And there's nobody you can ask."

"What are you trying to say, Vox?"

"I'm not trying to say anything. I'm saying it. I have to leave the ship on my own and disappear."

"No. You can't do that!"

"Sure I can. It'll be just like starwalking. I can go anywhere I please. Right through the skin of the ship, out into heaven. And keep on going."

"To Cul-de-Sac?"

"You're being stupid," she said. "Not to Cul-de-Sac, no. Not to anywhere. That's all over for me, the idea of getting a new body. I have no legal existence any more. I've messed myself up. All right: I admit it. I'll take what's coming to me. It won't be so bad, Adam. I'll go starwalking. Outward and outward and outward, forever and ever."

"You mustn't," I said. "Stay here with me."

"Where? In this empty storage unit out here?"

"No," I told her. "Within me. The way we are right now. The way we were before."

"How long do you think we could carry that off?" she asked.

I didn't answer.

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"Every time you have to jack into the machinery I'll have to hide myself down deep," she said. "And I can't guarantee that I'll go deep enough, or that I'll stay down there long enough. Sooner or later they'll notice me. They'll find me. They'll eradicate me and they'll throw you out of the Service, or maybe they'll eradicate you too. No, Adam. It couldn't possibly work. And I'm not going to destroy you with me. I've done enough harm to you already."

"Vox—"

"No. This is how it has to be."

18.

And this is how it was. We were deep in the Spook Cluster now, and the Vainglory Archipelago burned bright on my realspace screen. Somewhere down there was the planet called Cul-de-Sac. Before we came to worldward of it, Vox would have to slip away into the great night of heaven.

Making a worldward approach is perhaps the most difficult maneuver a starship must achieve; and the captain must go to the edge of his abilities along with everyone else. Novice at my trade though I was, I would be called on to perform complex and challenging processes. If I failed at them, other crewmen might cut in and intervene, or, if necessary, the ship's intelligences might override; but if that came to pass my career would be destroyed, and there was the small but finite possibility, I suppose, that the ship itself could be gravely damaged or even lost.

I was determined, all the same, to give Vox the best send-off I could.

On the morning of our approach I stood for a time on Outerscreen Level, staring down at the world that called itself Cul-de-Sac. It glowed like a red eye in the night. I knew that it was the world Vox had chosen for herself, but all the same it seemed repellent to me, almost evil. I felt that way about all the worlds of the shore people now. The Service had changed me; and I knew that the change was irreversible. Never again would I go down to one of those worlds. The starship was my world now.

I went to the virtuality where Vox was waiting.

"Come," I said, and she entered me.

Together we crossed the ship to the Great Navigation Hall.

The approach team had already gathered: Raebuck, Fresco, Roacher, again, along with Pedregal, who would supervise the downloading of cargo. The intelligence on duty was 612 Jason. I greeted them with quick nods and we jacked ourselves together in approach series.

Almost at once I felt Roacher probing within me, searching for the fugitive intelligence that he still thought I might be harboring. Vox

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shrank back, deep out of sight. I didn't care. Let him probe, I thought. This will all be over soon.

"Request approach instructions," Fresco said.

"Simulation," I ordered.

The fiery red eye of Cul-de-Sac sprang into vivid representation before us in the hall. On the other side of us was the simulacrum of the ship, surrounded by sheets of white flame that rippled like the blaze of the aurora.

I gave the command and we entered approach mode.

We could not, of course, come closer to planetskin than a million ship-lengths, or Cul-de-Sac's inexorable forces would rip us apart. But we had to line the ship up with its extended mast aimed at the planet's equator, and hold ourselves firm in that position while the shoreships of Cul-de-Sac came swarming up from their red world to receive their cargo from us.

612 Jason fed me the coordinates and I gave them to Fresco, while Raebuck kept the channels clear and Roacher saw to it that we had enough power for what we had to do. But as I passed the data along to Fresco, it was with every sign reversed. My purpose was to aim the mast not downward to Cul-de-Sac but outward toward the stars of heaven.

At first none of them noticed. Everything seemed to be going serenely. Because my reversals were exact, only the closest examination of the ship's position would indicate our 180-degree displacement.

Floating in the free fall of the Great Navigation Hall, I felt almost as though I could detect the movements of the ship. An illusion, I knew. But a powerful one. The vast ten-kilometer-long needle that was the *Sword of Orion* seemed to hang suspended, motionless, and then to begin slowly, slowly to turn, tipping itself on its axis, reaching for the stars with its mighty mast. Easily, easily, slowly, silently—

What joy that was, feeling the ship in my hand!

The ship was mine. I had mastered it.

"Captain," Fresco said softly.

"Easy on, Fresco. Keep feeding power."

"Captain, the signs don't look right—"

"Easy on. Easy."

"Give me a coordinates check, Captain."

"Another minute," I told him.

"But—"

"Easy on, Fresco."

Now I felt restlessness too from Pedregal, and a slow chilly stirring of interrogation from Raebuck; and then Roacher probed me again, perhaps seeking Vox, perhaps simply trying to discover what was going on. They knew something was wrong, but they weren't sure what it was.

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We were nearly at full extension, now. Within me there was an electrical trembling: Vox rising through the levels of my mind, nearing the surface, preparing for departure.

"Captain, we're turned the wrong way!" Fresco cried.

"I know," I said. "Easy on. We'll swing around in a moment."

"He's gone crazy!" Pedregal blurted.

I felt Vox slipping free of my mind. But somehow I found myself still aware of her movements, I suppose because I was jacked into 612 Jason and 612 Jason was monitoring everything. Easily, serenely, Vox melted into the skin of the ship.

"Captain!" Fresco yelled, and began to struggle with me for control.

I held the navigator at arm's length and watched in a strange and wonderful calmness as Vox passed through the ship's circuitry all in an instant and emerged at the tip of the mast, facing the stars. And cast herself adrift.

Because I had turned the ship around, she could not be captured and acquired by Cul-de-Sac's powerful navigational grid, but would be free to move outward into heaven. For her it would be a kind of floating out to sea, now. After a time she would be so far out that she could no longer key into the shipboard bioprocessors that sustained the patterns of her consciousness, and, though the web of electrical impulses that was the Vox matrix would travel outward and onward forever, the set of identity responses that was Vox herself would lose focus soon, would begin to waver and blur. In a little while, or perhaps not so little, but inevitably, her sense of herself as an independent entity would be lost. Which is to say, she would die.

I followed her as long as I could. I saw a spark traveling across the great night. And then nothing.

"All right," I said to Fresco. "Now let's turn the ship the right way around and give them their cargo."

19.

That was many years ago. Perhaps no one else remembers those events, which seem so dreamlike now even to me. The *Sword of Orion* has carried me nearly everywhere in the galaxy since then. On some voyages I have been captain; on others, a downloader, a supercargo, a mind-wiper, even sometimes a push-cell. It makes no difference how we serve, in the Service.

I often think of her. There was a time when thinking of her meant coming to terms with feelings of grief and pain and irrecoverable loss, but no longer, not for many years. She must be long dead now, however

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durable and resilient the spark of her might have been. And yet she still lives. Of that much I am certain. There is a place within me where I can reach her warmth, her strength, her quirky vitality, her impulsive suddenness. I can feel those aspects of her, those gifts of her brief time of sanctuary within me, as a living presence still, and I think I always will, as I make my way from world to tethered world, as I journey onward everlastingly spanning the dark light-years in this great ship of heaven. ●

NEXT ISSUE:

Kim Stanley Robinson returns to these pages next issue with our October cover story, "Mother Goddess of the World," a novella which shares some characters in common—although it's not quite a sequel—with last year's popular "Escape From Kathmandu." Like that previous story, "Mother Goddess of the World" takes place in Nepal, one of the most remote and exotic locales in the world, but this time Robinson takes us deep into the Himalayas, up Chomolungma, Mother Goddess of the World, the tallest mountain on Earth (you probably know it better as Mt. Everest), on a risky, improbable, and deceitedly *strange* quest; funny, fresh, and exuberant, this delightful screwball comedy is Robinson at his best. **Ian Watson** is also on hand in October, and in "The Moon and Michelangelo" he takes us from The Roof of the World across space to a different world, a distant alien world whose inhabitants practice a bizarre alien art-form, producing works of a strange and terrible beauty... works that the human crew of the *Michelangelo* must try to understand if they are to survive...

Also in October: **Jack Dann** returns to these pages after too long an absence with the compelling and strangely-beautiful tale of a dying boy's "Visitors"; **Bruce McAllister** makes a brilliant *IAsfm* debut with "Dream Baby," as powerful and hard-hitting a story as you are likely to see this year; the amazing **Neal Barrett, Jr.** returns with another of his unorthodox tales, this one the chilling story of the bizarre fate that befalls "The Class of '61"; and, last but not least, the ever-surprising **Bruce Sterling** takes us on a wry and funny visit to "The Little Magic Shop." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our October issue on sale on your newsstands on August 25, 1987.

Coming in November: the first and only publication of Harlan Ellison's monumental *I, Robot: The Movie.* Sure to be one of the publishing events of the year. Don't miss it!

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THE FAMOUS HOSPITALITY OF DAO'I

They landed: a hung, stunned hour we waited
For someone to tell us we were awed, or scandalized.
Then, by the Code, we welcomed these round, damp-eyed
Strangers with swollen mouths. By the Code, we
Have always been an hospitable people.

They came among us, shifting and scratching
In loaned robes, and we scratched also, politely.
We coughed when they shared our suppers,
Coughing. We never flinched when they asked
For liquid and swallowed it at the table. By the Code
We dressed and feasted them and never murmured
As we burned their clothing afterward.

We helped them clear the stones from the plain
Outside Dao'i, hauling boulders and loads of pebble.
By the Code we turned our faces from the wetness
That appeared on their skins, hiding our revulsion.
We brought all that they asked for, and to jibes
And complaints we made no answer. By the Code,
We gave every assistance and took no offense.

Now, riding down from the forest of Tuom,
Or coming over the ridge from Niane'i,
The fat white dome of their "embassy"
Is the first thing you see of the city.
In their halting, booming lisps they talk
Of "conquests" and "treaties" and "diplomats."
On these matters, the Code is silent. Scholars
Pore sleepless over obscure texts. A watch is posted
At the gates of the city, and the strangers' talk
Is all of something they call "home," and departure.
Barbarians. Have they no morals? Our hospitality
Has been arduous, but impeccable. Can they imagine
We will permit them to disgrace us and break the Code
By leaving?

—J. J. Hunt

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Divine Originality

Divine Endurance

By Gwyneth Jones
Arbor House, $15.95

Tired of science fiction about violent near-futures with genetically-engineered punks who don't have to dye their hair blue because it grows that way? Tired of fantasies about magical kingdoms beset by know-it-all dragons? Weary of space operas and endless trips to the bridge to undergo yet another battle with the mindless alien swarm? Or the ongoing struggle of the neurotic female officer to fit in with her shipmates who are really oversized tabby cats?

Take heart. Despite all the clones, spin-offs and downright imitations we're being besieged with in science fiction and fantasy these days, there is still, here and there, originality. Gwyneth Jones's *Divine Endurance* has it in full measure.

It begins mysteriously in a crumbling palace set in a vast wasteland, whose major (and soon, only) inhabitants are a cat and an adolescent girl. Fear not, however. *Divine Endurance* is labeled as "a science fiction novel" on the jacket, and it indeed is. You are soon made aware that the girl, Cho (short for "Chosen Among the Beautiful") and the sentient, knowledgeable feline, whose name is Divine Endurance, are created beings of some sort, and that there is also present a "Controller." This Controller is an artificial mind that has brought Cho, at least, into being, but it "dies," and Cho and DE go off into the wilderness, seeking Cho's twin brother, who has been given into the hands of wandering nomads at "birth."

Switch to a complicated milieu of squabbling, semi-barbaric kingdoms. These share what was once the Malay Penninsula, and it emerges that it is some thousands of years after a nuclear holocaust. Civilization has maintained a precarious toehold here; the culture is a strange mix of Indonesian and half-remembered Western (the double helix has become a symbol). Then there are the mysterious "Rulers," who dominate at a distance from a continent to the south, and who have, it is rumored, maintained a technological culture.

I simply don't have the space here to go into the complexities of the exotic, intricate milieux and situations that Ms. Jones has created, or just what Divine Endurance, Cho, and her brother really are, or their impact on these post-

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holocaust peoples. But it's not quite like anything one has come across previously.

Particularly admirable is the use of the Indonesian cultural themes (themselves strange permutations of Indian and Buddhist), which the author obviously knows well, without making them quaint or too obscure (though a basic knowledge on the reader's part does help). From the jacket quotes (reviews of the British edition, presumably), I am not the only person who thought of the work of Le Guin while reading *Divine Endurance*. But that is only in the broadest sense; the novel really is a true original.

Little Ægypt

Ægypt
By John Crowley
Bantam, $17.95

One of the pleasures of looking back on a lengthy period of reading SF and fantasy is remembering those rare times when one read a work by a new author and had that feeling of certainty that here was something special. (Of course, one remembers those that did go on to do interesting things, and conveniently forgets when that feeling struck and the author in question was never heard of again—I wonder how many times *that* happened?) Perhaps the clearest recollection I have in that direction is coming across John Crowley's first published novel, *The Deep*, and the conviction that here was a born writer with an extremely unorthodox imagination.

Crowley's first several novels did nothing to undermine this opinion, and with them he gathered a smallish following of readers who knew they were on to something interesting. Then Crowley broke through with *Little, Big*, a long fantasy that was something of a *cause celebre*; it was one of those novels that you either loved or hated, caused a great deal of discussion (mostly limited to "I loved it!" "*I* hated it!" as always in these circumstances), and achieved a sort of cult status, particularly on the West Coast. This last probably has nothing to do with the fact that some of us found it long, shapeless, and often obscure because of an overemphasis on matters verging perilously close to mysticism (not denying still the fertile imagination and the brilliant writing).

Now there is Crowley's first novel since *Little, Big*. It is called *Ægypt*. It is about Pierce Moffett, a young(ish) professor of history, whose none-too-distinguished life and career are covered in detail in a series of flashbacks. This is counterpointed with: the current life of Rosie, a young(ish) woman who lives in a small town in New York State and who is undergoing a mildly messy divorce; episodes in the lives of the first Queen Elizabeth's resident alchemist, mathematician, and physician, Dr. John Dee (concentrating on his search for communication with angels), and Giordano Bruno, the Italian philosopher who was burned at the stake by the Church for not re-

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canting his scientific discoveries; and excerpts from historical novels written by a fellow townsman of Rosie's. Pierce wants to write a book about Ægypt, a mystical country which is *not* Egypt, from which comes much of the world's arcane knowledge. Ægypt was lost about the time the Age of Reason began, and its history is not quite part that of the "real" world's. A persistent theme throughout the book is that "there is more than one history of the world." Pierce and Rosie find an unfinished manuscript by the deceased historical novelist which touches on these matters.

All that is what's *in* the book, as well as a good deal of medieval and Renaissance occultism, a balloon trip, some acid views of the college scenes of the 1960s, an angel or two, and a whole lot of other things. What the novel is *about* is another matter, and quite frankly I haven't the foggiest. Perhaps those that so took to *Little, Big* will know. In the meantime, I can but hope that Crowley will apply that sumptuous imagination and great writing talent to a comprehensible book for the rest of us.

2 + 4

Vacuum Flowers
By Michael Swanwick
Arbor House, $16.95

Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark (Rebel's the name, not a description) has a problem. She's sharing a body with one Eucrasia Walsh; in fact, it's Eucrasia's body, but Rebel's *persona* is more or less in control for the time being.

As if that weren't enough, she gets involved with a tetrad. What's a tetrad? It's a single human mind with four distinct personalities —attached to a body, fortunately. This tetrad is named Wyeth, and the four personalities are modeled after the makeup of an Aboriginal hunting party—leader, warrior, mystic, clown. Rebel, whose complexities of mind also include a touch of Electra, prefers the warrior on top (as it were) when they are making love.

This muddled pair (or crowd) lives in the dizzying future of Michael Swanwick's *Vacuum Flowers* in which mental characteristics, talents, and personalities are taken on and off as easily as one slips a program disc into one's computer. There are any number of human subcultures spread among the planets and various space habitats of the Solar System, and they are all more or less menaced by Earth itself, the population of which has been taken over by (or become) a sort of hive mind, and is in essence a single entity. This occurred due to a horrendous mishap in personality communication, fortunately *after* a good part of humanity had dispersed into space and therefore avoided being mentally collectivized.

Rebel is on the run, since for reasons too complicated to explain one of her personalities is very much wanted by Deutsche Nakasone, a corporation that deals in them, and

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it could be a best-seller. Her flight (and meeting with the multiply-inclined Wyeth) also involves her with the rampant intrigue between humanity and the Comprise, the name of the inhabitant(s) of Earth. The Comprise is searching for a way to send units of itself into space without having them break away from the collective personality, and everyone's looking for a way out of the Solar System (perfectly understandable under the circumstances).

Swanwick is one of those authors who speeds along pell-mell with his narrative, introducing characters, ideas, and references with little explanation, and one can only hope eventually an explanation will be forthcoming—sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't. If coherence is absolutely necessary to you, don't bother—it's presumably down there somewhere, but doesn't surface that much. Take it like one of the current movies in which the script doesn't make overmuch sense, but which carries you along with shoot-outs and car chases and bizarre images.

Doyley Start

Timefall

By James Kahn

St. Martin's Press, $16.95

An expedition into the Amazon jungles in search of treasure and a lost city! A petrified human skull with one jeweled eye, scientifically dated to an age of seventy-five million years! The journal of a crazed scientist, sent to the author who publishes it as fiction, since obviously no one will believe it.

Sound familiar? James Kahn has all the classic ingredients going in the first chapters of *Timefall*. You hope for a whiz-bang ripping yarn, a modern version of Doyle's *The Lost World*, for instance.

We speed through the preliminaries in the usual slapdash but enthralling fashion. The expedition is financed by a millionaire, an unlikely combination of drug smuggler and artifact collector with connections in Amazonia. With him he takes a young paleonotologist and his wife. The skull, when lit from within, has projected a map of a specific area of the Colombian jungle. Braving untold jungle perils and a few ghostly figures that pop up around the campfire one night, they find the lost city which of course is in a valley surrounded by cave-riddled cliffs, entered (how else?) through a passage behind a waterfall.

After some satisfying dustups with the light-skinned natives and the discovery of a golden statue which bears an uncanny resemblance to the young scientist-hero, however, things get pretty messy. Seems that the caverns surrounding the city are time nodes entering various eras of history, which seem to contain just about everything but a kitchen sink. Oh, not just dinosaurs—*they* were the creation of an advanced human culture of some seventy-five million years ago, who also managed to geneti-

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cally engineer centaurs, vampires, and other fun critters.

All this is revealed by a lovely female android who has been hanging around the caverns waiting for the hero to show up; he's a sort of reincarnation of the skull's owner, and she wants him to save the universe, which is running down, by importing energy from other times. Quite frankly, at this point I rather lost track, what with all sorts of unidentified time tracks, ghosts, reincarnations, creatures, and what all being flung about. Author Kahn might do better to curb his fertile imagination, and concentrate on telling a story with fewer ingredients and more shape to it.

Horrors!

The Encyclopedia of Horror Movies

Edited by Phil Hardy
Harper & Row, $16.95 (paper)

So why am I reviewing a book on the horror film in this magazine dedicated to that rational end of the fantasy spectrum called science fiction, some of whose readers turn pale even at the mention of Tolkien and won't even admit the existence of Lovecraft?

Because, like Lovecraft, the cinema through much of its existence has inextricably combined horror and science fiction. Being a mass medium, and generally handling concepts acceptable to a wide audience, the movies have until comparatively recently considered scientists (almost always mad) and extraterrestrial beings fit only to inspire fear and loathing in the audience. Sporadic attempts to introduce the idea of a nice guy from space, as in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, were almost always countered by such films as *The Thing* (released in the same year). The nasty ET turned out to be the most popular (and profitable), therefore spawning clones innumerable, and not until the *Star Wars* wave started did we get aliens who were human (as it were), who could be accepted by the audience as someone you'd take home to dinner.

So *The Encyclopedia of Horror Movies* edited by Phil Hardy contains entries on more than a few SF films, from the venerable *Frankenstein* (the earliest productions of which could well have begun the confusion between SF and horror) and the equally seminal *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* through *Alien*, though whimsically ignoring *The Devil-Doll*, *The Blob*, and the most horrible horror of all, *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. (In all fairness, it should be noted that there was an earlier work on science fiction films by the same team which included those movies which could be considered either genre.) Also handled are some films which walk the fine line between pure fantasy and horror, such as *The Company of Wolves*.

Given those vague borderlines, the comprehensiveness of this volume is staggering. There are 1300 entries, arranged by year and then alphabetically within the year

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(awkward for quick reference, since if you don't know the date of a film you have to check the index). The book is particularly strong on foreign-language films; it will neatly sort out all those Mexican, Italian, and Spanish movies that turn up late at night, usually atrociously dubbed and edited. There is also better-than-usual coverage of silent films. All the photos are black and white, but there are over 450 of them, nicely reproduced and a good percentage of which are not the same old photos one usually sees. The entry for each film is succinct but fact-filled, inevitably opinionated but usually sensibly so.

All in all, this is an invaluable reference work for the fantasy film buff. The writing, it should be noted, is by Tom Milne and Paul Willemen, with contributions by Verina Glaessner, Julian Petley, and Tim Pulliene. (Interesting to see a woman included—film scholarship, particularly in the area of SF and horror, has been very much a man's field, for no reason that I can think of.) The photographs are from the Kobal Collection.

Celtic Midnight

Yearwood
By Paul Hazel
Bantam, $3.95 (paper)

Ahead of its time might be the term for Paul Hazel's fantasy, *Yearwood*, first published back in 1980.

Then, I wondered in print as to who would like this novel, since the fantasy lovers who want talking dragons, crusty old magicians with hearts of gold, and noble heroines would be put off by its brutal nonromanticism. Not that much has changed; the fantasy fans still seem inexhaustibly fond of talking dragons, etc. Nevertheless, the (relative) success of such out-of-left-field and stylish fantasies as *Mythago Wood* raises a bit of hope that dense, dark examples of the genre that are off the beaten track (we are speaking here, naturally, of two trackless Woods) might currently achieve more popularity.

In plot, *Yearwood* is the old, old one about the youth searching for his father and his inheritance—and it's not spoiling anything to say that Father is a High King and the inheritance is a kingdom. But the novel is not a lightsome quest; it echoes in tone the primal myths that are the basis for all of this kind of heroic fantasy.

The world is one of Celtic myth (more specifically Scots, at a guess), but the actions and situations often have a very specific relation to Norse/Germanic legend. Magic—of many varieties—is prevalent, and is so a part of life that it is used almost automatically, as is any inherent talent.

The nameless hero (his name—or names—is part of the quest) leaves the castle of his foster father and witch mother in search of his heritage, a search in which bloodshed, murder, incest, witchcraft, creatures of the sea, and a ship of the dead play their part. There are ancient magic forests and speaking

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birds, ghosts of kings, and, of course, a sword.

What distinguishes *Yearwood* is its darkness. One has heard of the Celtic twilight—this is more like the Celtic midnight, with no comic relief, not even a love interest.

A word for the magnificent cover on this new edition. It is by the artist Mel Odom, who has illustrated for *Playboy* and done a very few striking book covers in the past (*Maia*). His style might be called *nouveau nouveau*, with its echoes of Sime, Beardsley, and Erté (it has, however, a modern decadence of its very own). That heritage has always said *fantasy* to me, and I've been surprised that so few fantasy book covers have attempted to evoke it. It's not exactly esoteric at this point (last year's December *Playboy* cover was by Erté), and I hope other publishers will note that paperback fantasy covers are looking relentlessly similar these days and try for something stylish à la Odom.

Shoptalk

Those readers who got a kick out of Larry Niven's outrageous but believable concept of a planetless planet—a colony of giant trees infested with humans drifting in a doughnut of breathable air in space—in *The Integral Trees* will be happy to know that the sequel, by name *The Smoke Ring*, is now available (Del Rey, $16.95) . . . On the other end of the spectrum—from high tech to low fantasy—there should be glee at the appearance of David Eddings' *Guardians of the West*, Book One of "The Mallorean," a sequel series (there must be a word for that) to his five-novel sequence, "The Belgariad." (No word as to how many novels in the new series, but the next one up is called *High Hunt*.) Don't get me wrong—I mean no disrespect by the term "low fantasy," but there was just too much rollicking going on in the first series to really qualify it as *high* fantasy, even though most of the ingredients were there. Eddings kept the ball bouncing through five novels; not easy, and let's hope the new lot is as good (Del Rey, $16.95).

Locus Press presents a handy tool for the scholar and hard-core collector with *Science Fiction In Print: 1985* subtitled "A Comprehensive Bibliography of Books and Short Fiction Published in the English Language" (note that "Short Fiction," which means it includes magazine listings, which is always handy). It's by Charles N. Brown and William G. Contento, and is available only from the publisher ($29.95 + $2.00 post. per copy from Locus Press, PO Box 13305, Oakland CA 94661) . . . If you're a cyberpunk freak, push your blue fringe up into your orange spikes and rush for *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* edited by Bruce Sterling, with stories by John Shirley, Greg Bear, William Gibson, Andre Norton et al. (Just kidding about Norton; wanted to see if you were awake.) (Arbor House, $16.95) . . . Speaking of covers (see above), the "old" mas-

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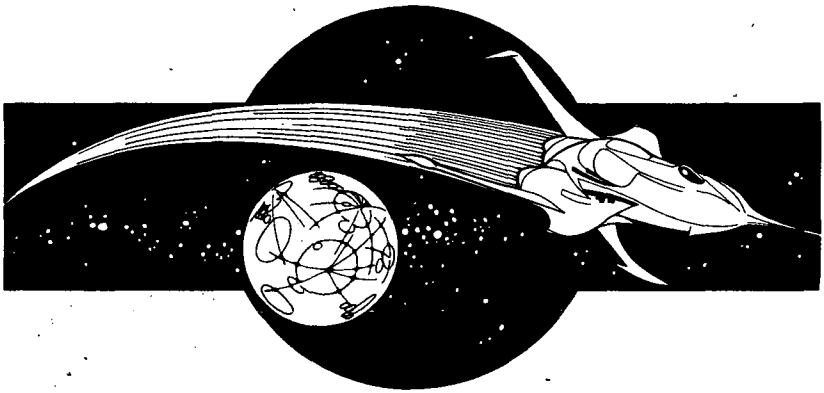
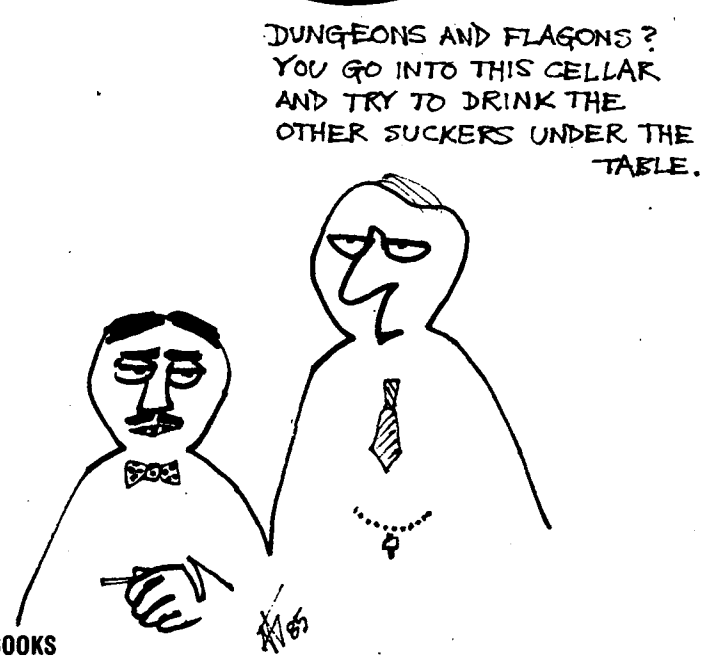
ters can still come up with some masterpieces. Take a look at the Boris cover for Ben Bova's *Voyagers II*. It's a beauty. (Tor, $3.50).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Past, Present, and Future* by Isaac Asimov (Prometheus, $19.95); *The Great SF Stories: 16 (1954)* edited by Isaac Asimov and Martin H. Greenberg (DAW, $3.50, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, 380 Bleecker Street, Suite 133, New York, NY 10014. ●





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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

A number of con(vention)s are coming up in Canada and overseas. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, & a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's a good time to phone cons (most are home numbers) (be polite). For free listings, tell me about your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons behind the iridescent Filthy Pierre badge.

JULY, 1987

17-19—**OKon.** For info, write: **Box 4229, Tulsa OK 74159.** Or call: **(918) 622-2225** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Tulsa OK (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: C. J. Cherryh, W. A. (Bob) Tucker, artist R. Musgrave, fan Jan Finder, Lee & Pat Killough.

17-19—**UniCon.** Holiday Inn, Annapolis MD. David ("Sundiver") Brin. Back again, after a year off.

24-26—**ConVersion. (403) 242-1807.** Carriage House Inn, Calgary, Canada. Joan Vinge, Jim Frenkel.

24-27—**MythCon.** Marquette U., Milwaukee WI. Annual High Fantasy con (Tolkien and the Inklings).

31-Aug. 2—**RiverCon. (502) 448-6562.** Louisville KY. Bob (Slow Glass) Shaw. Sunday river cruise.

31-Aug. 2—**WeaponsCon. Holiday Inn Airport North, Atlanta GA.** Theme: "Weapons in SF/fantasy." L. N. Smith, R. Adams, J. & S. Ahern, J. M. Roberts. You must wear a weapon (if only paper dagger).

AUGUST, 1987

8-9—**26th Japan Nat'l. Con, 1-10-35 Owari-cho, Kanazawa, Ishikawa-ken 920, Japan.** Yamanaka Spa.

27-Sep. 2—**Conspiracy, 23 Kensington Ct., Hempstead NY 11550.** Brighton UK. The 1987 WorldCon.

28-30—**BuboniCon, Box 37527, Albuquerque NM 87176.** A relaxed con to rest up for NASFiC next week.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

3-7—**CactusCon, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282.** Phoenix AZ. 1987 NASFiC. $50 advance, $60 at door.

18-20—**CopperCon, Box 11743, Phoenix AZ 85061. (602) 968-5673.** Relaxacon, to rest up from NASFiC.

18-20—**MosCon, Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843. (208) 822-1611.** Jack ("The Humanoids") Williamson.

18-20—**Triangulum, Box 92456, Milwaukee WI 53202. (414) 327-7325.** Frederik Pohl, Donald Schmidt.

OCTOBER, 1987

9-11—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** Ben ("Colony") Bova, artist Kelly Freas, Hal ("Mission of Gravity") Clement, C. (Warlock) Stasheff. Out of the high school, at the Quality Inn.

9-11—**ArmadilloCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766. (515) 443-3491.** B. Sterling, B. Meacham, Cadigan.

29-Nov. 1—**World Fantasy Con, Box 22817, Nashville TN 37202.** Piers Anthony, artist Kelly Freas, Charles L. Grant, Karl Edward Wagner, Val & Ron Lindahn. Join quick for $50 (will sell out fast).

SEPTEMBER, 1988

1-5—**NoLaCon II, 921 Canal #831, New Orleans LA 70112. (504) 525-6008.** Featuring pre-1939 fans.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** Boston MA. WorldCon. $50 to 9/7.

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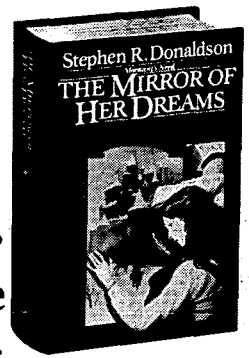

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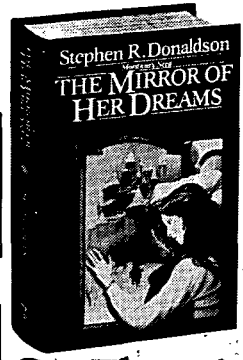

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